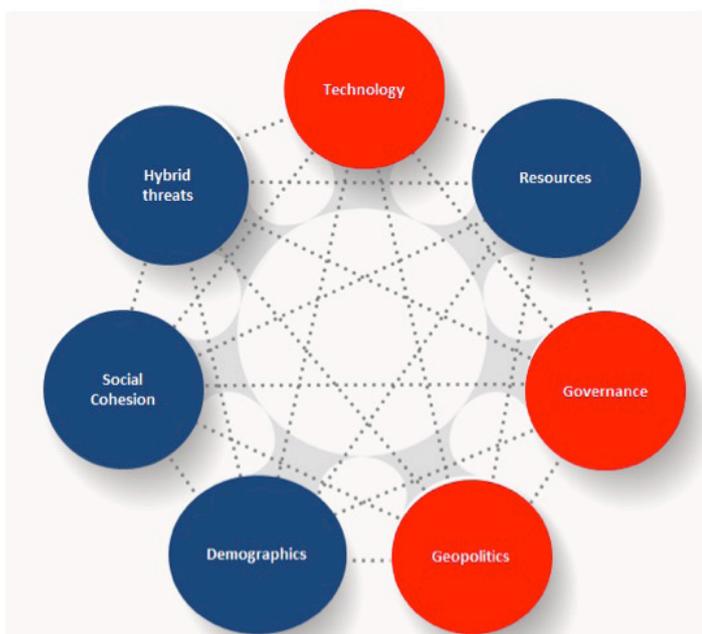


The future of peace and security: Interlinkages in a complex world

In its 70th year, the UN General Assembly is organising a high level discussion on the future of international peace and security in a World of Risks. How do we renew our commitment to peace? Proceeding from international calamity to calamity, people are left increasingly pessimistic about the future of international security and the ability of states to respond. Concerned about developments, over the last year, the World Economic Forum brought together a wide range of public and private sector stakeholders engaged in responding to international risks, aiming to address present and future challenges to peace and security. This brief is based on the Forum's Risk Report and does not attempt to prescribe how the UN should respond to these threats. Instead, it provides three scenarios as food for thought, aiming to spur a discussion on how the future might look if current trends are allowed to continue unchecked.



Surveying the current state of peace and security, the landscape looks bleak: wars rage across the Middle East, tensions simmer in Asia, parts of Africa see an upsurge in political violence, and millions of people are fleeing their homes. The European integration project is in the midst of its largest crisis to date. A wave of terrorist attacks across the world and the “weaponization” of economic policies are globalizing the battlefield. The geopolitical uncertainty that has become a feature of our time shows no sign of letting up. Among the main dimensions characterising today’s peace and security landscape, three in particular stand out: The first is the return of geopolitical competition between strong states with divergent interests and visions of world order. The second is our failure to anticipate and manage emerging security risks that stem from new technologies. The third is a failure of adaptation in our institutions of governance, leading to a spectrum of problems from a breakdown in trust between rulers and ruled, state fragility and ultimately state failure.

The three phenomena are connected in ways that reinforce challenges for peace and security. When instability leads to the breakdown of the existing order, it creates opportunities for other forces to exploit. Non-state actors are increasingly empowered by easier access to technological innovations, or engaged as proxies in a hybrid war. In both cases the intersection of these trends makes it all the more difficult to craft effective responses, and so conflicts tend to fester and spread.

The potential for rapid and radical change raises fundamental questions about planning and preparedness and what can happen if we fail to get it right. To understand the forces behind the transformations, the World Economic Forum initiated a year-long consultation drawing on the expertise of over 280 leaders in six regions, to identify the key drivers, globally and regionally, shaping the changing international security landscape. These are not intended to be predictions, but plausible trajectories that can usefully challenge current thinking and serve as a call to a new commitment to peace.



The three scenarios may come across as somewhat dystopian, especially when combined, because they are extrapolations of existing, negative trends. The world does not need to arrive at these dystopias, however. Our collective knowledge, connectedness, technological advances and social innovations present endless opportunities to change the outcome and shape a more secure world, given strong leadership and the right decisions being taken at the international level. To create a new commitment to peace there is a need to cast new light on decisions that need to be taken today to help change the trajectory we are on and improve the outcome.

“Walled cities” Central state governance fails to meet the challenges of service provision, leading more and more people to switch to private sector providers, at least those who can still afford it. Clean water and even fresh air – previously treated as public goods - become preciously traded commodities. The retreat of government as the guarantor of basic services leaves society increasingly polarised between socio-economic elites and an impoverished class with little social mobility. Demographic mobility increases as large groups migrate in search of a living. Refugee camps expand and become permanent. However, their youth are increasingly drawn into gangs and virtual groups hostile to `the system`. A shrinking class of taxpayers demands protection and accepts a more authoritarian rule as the price of keeping order. Walls go up. This works in the districts they identify as socially and economically critical, i.e. major cities. Outside the metaphorical (or physical) walls, gangs seize territory and govern as un-recognized `states`. For actual states, domestic threats have become so intense that they have little capacity to engage in collective security action through international or regional organizations, which gradually wither away. Responsibility for governance and service provision of all kinds moves away from national governments towards the more successful city-states, which manage to connect to each other and thrive as an archipelago of islands in a sea of disorder.

“Strong regions” As relatively larger shares of wealth accumulate in the South and East, power shifts to regional hegemony that consolidate spheres of influence and replace sovereign states as the principle unit of global order. The system is held together by mutual respect among strong leaders, who emphasise the pursuit of narrowly defined national interests over global commons. Governments make increasingly effective use of surveillance and high-tech media systems to control the population with manufactured historical narratives and exaggerated projections of external threats, emphasising themes of ethnic or religious difference. New regional institutions are set up that fragment trade and the global commons. As these come to dominate international relations, the old UN and Bretton Woods institutions of global governance wither away. In parallel, efforts to control global warming are dropped in favour of unilateral measures to adapt to the changes. There are efficiency losses in the retreat from globalization, but elites mostly convince their people that this is an acceptable price to pay for stability. The private sector loses its independence as inter-regional trade is limited and they come increasingly under the informal control of the new regional governance institutions.

“War and Peace”: Established powers remain in denial about the implications of power shifts and impact of technological change. Global trade falls and the major economies stagnate. The old key states of the world order turn inward and abandon collective action such as peacekeeping, rule-making and policing of the global commons, and policies to protect the environment. A growing sense of lawlessness encourages emerging powers test the status quo, sometimes with tacit or open encouragement from their major power allies. Finally, unable to resolve competing visions of world order and geo-political interest, a proxy war draws two of the great powers into major conventional conflict. The nuclear taboo is respected, but despite dragging in a number of third party allies both sides fail to gain an advantage, achieving only mutual exhaustion. As an uneasy peace emerges, people’s minds return to the question of what kinds of norms and structures are needed to govern international relations. Eager to restore global trade, private sector institutions take the lead, focusing on modest rules to govern peaceful use of the global commons. Leadership positions in these new bodies are taken not by civil servants but by double-hatting industry and civil society leaders. The urgency of restoring the world’s economic health makes trade and investment relations a priority, and the social or `values` agenda, such as promotion of universal human rights, takes a back seat. Indeed the notion of a universal set of values to which all peoples should aspire is abandoned as a paradigm of world order. A considerable amount of inequality emerges but is broadly accepted as the price of peace.

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