

CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND NATIONAL INTERESTS

As we prepare to move into a new decade, we are facing a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment. The power balance is no longer weighted to the West, as Asia gains more and more prominence. The role of existing multilateral alliances is diminishing, with several key global players being increasingly preoccupied with domestic concerns. At the same time, old rivalries have been re-emerging.

As a result, the geopolitical foundations we knew for decades are making way for a new normal. How we adapt to it will determine the course of our future – and that of our children. At the same time, the challenges we collectively face are changing and increase in complexity. They include the spread of extremism and terrorism, the threat of economic crises, conflicts raging in the Middle East and its fallout, including mass migration.

Our increasingly globalized world means these challenges are more wide-ranging than ever. Issues which arise in far-flung countries have the potential to affect us all.

It is important to acknowledge that geopolitical transformations can bring about periods of heightened uncertainty. Much has been said of the “Thucydides Trap” - the Ancient Greek scholar posited that conflict is inevitable when rising powers emerge to rival dominant ones. He warned that when new powers rise – and alter the establish status quo – the risk of confrontation increases. While this outcome is not inevitable, it deserves our careful attention to prevent any escalation. It is only natural that the political order installed in the last century was bound to change – and for the tectonic plates of influence to shift.

Many countries have aspirations to influence world affairs. For this, you need economic clout – and you therefore need to be engaged beyond your borders. Trade wars are not the answer. Instead of withdrawing into protectionist policies, we need more powers to come to the table - and contribute to the growth of the global economy.

Overall, a multipolar world is better than a unipolar one, and the existence of new world powers could be a source of strength for all nations. The emergence of this new balance of power must be handled maturely by all sides. Instead of seeing each other as rivals, key world players should focus on interacting more closely at the summit level and increasing their use of soft power.

On a security level, the nature of the wars we are fighting has changed. Most countries are not equipped to handle the spread of terrorism and extremism - our present world order has so far struggled to develop a coherent and adequate counter-strategy. The world needs to focus on a strategy to deal with these developments, and the sectarian, tribal, ethnic, nationalistic and religious issues which feed into them. It is still not properly understood how these organisations develop and gain ground – more sophisticated intelligence is needed to understand their funding and command and control structures, as well as the links they have with other groups. Traditional ways of tracing and tracking communication also do not work in the same way. We should also have a strategy for addressing the issues of return risk and handling those citizens who fled to fight among extremist groups, and now wish to return to their home countries. Special programmes are needed to rehabilitate them and ensure that they are not a threat to others.

Most importantly, we must address the root causes of terrorism, which involves recognising that this is much more than a security matter – it is a hearts and minds

matter. Terrorism and extremism are both factors of deprivation. This means they spread by preying on the disillusioned, people who are struggling to find a place in their own society. Deprivation manifests itself in many forms – it can be a lack of opportunity, an absence of human rights or a voice, and a lack of resolution of disputes. When deprivation reaches a tipping point, when people feel they are not heard, that is when they can become vulnerable to conversion to extreme causes. We must focus all our energy on finding solutions for these root causes. We must also develop our intelligence capabilities and our methods for fighting these non state actors. Only then can we have a chance to truncate the movement of people wishing to cross borders to give their lives for these causes.

Over the years, several mistakes have been made by the international community in its global approach. For example, not enough effort was made to generate economic activity following external interventions into other countries, from Afghanistan to parts of the Middle East. In any post-conflict environment, there should be a thought-out economic revival and growth plan, supported by the key countries and the Bretton Woods institutions. This must include credible structural reforms, tailored to the country in question. It is important to study these experiences and learn from the past. Military intervention to topple the leadership of a country, without a clear post-conflict strategy, is almost always a recipe for disaster. It increases the chance of failing states and of allowing non-state actors come in and fill the power vacuum.

It is important to stress that terrorism knows no borders or religion. Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance and the majority of Muslims are peace-loving people. But, increasingly, Islam is misunderstood and misrepresented in the West owing to the actions of fanatics. We must therefore challenge such a thesis – and promote inter-civilizational harmony and understanding through dialogue and engagement.

The emergence of attacks by lone wolves, either inspired by or loosely pledging affiliation to extremist groups, makes the task of maintaining security more complicated than ever. These are not part of elaborate cross-border terrorist plots, which were often coupled with a political agenda and message. The lone wolf attacks we see today are arguably all the more dangerous because they are so hard to trace and pre-empt.

A new approach needs to be devised to deal with the countries that are being directly affected by extremist elements as well as those who may be backing them. This is something which needs global coordination, intelligence sharing and joint security and military action. We must ask ourselves, what were the intelligence failures that allow groups like Islamic State to spread regionally and recruit globally?

The war in Syria is now the world's single-largest driver of displacement - millions of refugees have already fled the conflict zone. More than a million have settled in Jordan and others have moved to Turkey and Europe. While there are strong humanitarian reasons for giving refugees a home, a failure to control the flow of migrants could have troubling consequences for Europe. While migration can play a positive role in society and address the problem of an increasingly ageing population, which many developed countries are having, there must be the capacity to absorb the incoming migrants. Social security systems and infrastructure have to be equipped for them – and leaders have to convince their people that this can bring long-term benefit to their country and economy. If moderate leaders do not find a way to successfully handle the migration crisis, it is in danger of playing into the hands of far-right parties and extremist groups. Most importantly, global cooperation is key - countries including Russia, Turkey, the US and Europe must find ways to working together.

However, we face a global crisis of cooperation. This is seen within Europe, with growing tensions between the main economic and political superpowers, including the US, EU and Russia, and within multilateral forums, such as the United Nations security council. The world increasingly suffers from a leadership deficit as politicians and decision-makers lack a global view and are too focused on their short-term domestic political cycles. Lines of communication are breaking down. This is not a recipe for peace in the long-run.

At the heart of this has been a disappointingly weak United Nations. Over the past nine years, this once- heavyweight institution has been largely missing in action. It has repeatedly failed to lead the charge when crises have broken out, or successfully mediated in conflicts.

The best way to safeguard ourselves during such times is by building linkages and interdependencies. This applies to neighbouring countries, regions and key global players. Establishing reasons for them to work together is a true guarantor for peace plays a key role in lowering the temperature in the event of any tension. Cooperation is the true guarantor of peace.

The historic meeting of the leaders of North and South Korea in April 2018 is an encouraging sign of progress on the turbulent Korean peninsula. It should encourage other conflicting countries to show leadership in starting a dialogue on age old issues and challenges.

Both global and regional powers have to play their role in building peace and harmony and encouraging dialogue for resolving lingering issues. The United Nations should work more to rebuild its relevance by proactively encouraging peace building, refugee settlement and disaster management.

It is important for points of potential tension to be recognized and for solutions to be sought through dialogue and diplomacy. The war of words seen within Europe must be resolved. In the long term, it does not benefit any of the European countries to be adversarial towards any of its fellow states or neighbours. Instead there should be a greater effort to engage, emphasise points of common ground and build linkages, in order to develop a better relationship while respecting each other's sovereignty. Increased cooperation will help lower the temperature and the peace dividend will be high for both Russia and the EU countries. In the long term the security, stability and the prosperity of the whole of Europe can be attained with all major stakeholders working together.

It is worth pointing out that, in many parts of the world we have largely moved away from the scenario where conventional conflict is a viable option – in part because of the existence of a nuclear deterrent, and in part because the nature of competition itself is gradually changing. Global affairs now operate under two parallel paradigms: firstly, the traditional paradigm of power and rivalry; and secondly, the emerging paradigm of interdependence and common interest. At the present stage of history, both paradigms coexist uneasily, as evident in the seemingly contradictory behaviour of states - competing and cooperating simultaneously.

The power and rivalry paradigm remains dominant in the policy establishments of the United States, China, Russia and other countries. For example, it manifests itself in today's increasingly challenging Asian security environment, such as the alliances being built by the United States in Asia and the shift of America's naval power from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Meanwhile China has been building and developing its ties with Russia, Central Asia, Iran, Latin America and Africa, as well as consolidating old relationships, such as with Pakistan. However, whatever these movements indicate, the situation is unlikely to reach the stage where it tips over into physical conflict.

A more realistic nearer- term scenario involves continued differing economic approaches between the important stakeholders, encompassing access to natural resources, rival development models and the need to increase influence in global economic and financial institutions. That said, work is still needed to diffuse existing tension over disputed territory. Focusing on areas where diplomacy and dialogue will help establish a working relationship.

There needs to be a new architecture for global cooperation, while any potential points of tension should be worked out through diplomacy and dialogue. New global institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) have been a promising step forward in multilateral cooperation. The AIIB is an opportunity for the region - and the world - to build a new financial infrastructure, one that more accurately reflects the realities of today's environment. It will complement the existing development institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the World Bank. The AIIB should run on four key principles - meritocracy, transparency, a level playing field for all stakeholders and high standards of governance. It has the benefit of not being hostage to history and not tied by historic rules, as is the case for the Bretton Woods institutions, which sometimes stifles their ability to adapt to the modern world.

Another important step forward towards building greater connectivity in the world is China's "One Belt One Road" initiative, an ambitious development policy launched by President Xi Jinping. It seeks to connect China to markets in Asia, Europe and further afield, and involves land and sea trade corridors, building connections along old and new trade routes between Central Asia, South Asia, China, Russia and Europe. It is expected to contribute to the further integration of the global economy and rising prosperity across Asia as well as Europe and Africa.

There is a great opportunity for other world powers - the US, Russia and the European countries - to build on China's initiative and focus on similarly inspiring greater cooperation, collaboration and connectivity through other initiatives. While a changing world order may be unsettling for some, the number of challenges collectively faced as a world, which cannot be solved unilaterally by any country, is only growing. Existing multilateral organisations should be reformed to bring them into the 21st century.

Close collaboration is increasingly indispensable on a growing number of other challenges we face, from cyber security to climate change and nuclear non-proliferation. In areas of potential conflict, the method of communication between key countries should be institutionalised, with frequent contact, dialogue and discussion to prevent conflict escalating through misunderstanding.

One of our greatest challenges we face as a world is one of demographics. In the developed countries, this manifests itself in the form of shrinking and ageing populations, which places ever greater strain on the welfare state. Conversely, many parts of the world are witnessing a rapid population boom. With such demographic trends, broad-based educational reforms are vital. Young people trying to join the labour force should be equipped with the required skill sets, to boost the number of opportunities open to them. Failure to do this could run the risk of having an alienated generation with a limited sense of disengagement with society. Policy makers should focus on unlocking the potential talent and capacity to work in these young people could be a huge boost for those countries, increasing growth and prosperity.

One of the biggest challenges for many countries is not only how to encourage growth, but how to make sure it is equitable. The economist Thomas Picketty has provided us with a stark warning about the dangers of the increasingly widening gap between the rich and poor. If prudent policies are not undertaken to manage

this transition, the social implications could be significant. Capitalising on the opportunities presented by technology – from increased automation to so-called “disruptive” innovation, which can transform old industries for the better – could be a step towards bringing our economies into the 21st century and unlocking new opportunities.

The fallout from the financial crisis a decade ago showed need to develop a way to better safeguard our systems from future economic shocks. The nature of economic cycles means there will always be another downturn. However, prudent policy-making and a commitment to ongoing structural reform can guard us against potential shocks. As economies mature, they increasingly need to change and deregulate to sustain their rate of growth. Structural reform, for many countries, should involve a programme of privatization, liberalization and deregulation. This will help open up industries to world-class standards of management, while making them more competitive.

In conclusion, the major global challenges we face - including terrorism, security failures, nuclear proliferation and natural disasters - cannot be solved unilaterally. No country or leader has an exclusive on wisdom. Before we can begin to effectively face up to the existential threat from terrorism its use by non-state actors, we must first establish a new architecture of global cooperation. It is unrealistic to expect any powers to see eye-to-eye on every issue, and disagreements are bound to arise. The challenge is to be able to work together despite this, constantly maintaining lines of communication. We need to be able to effectively share information, coordinate our responses and build a reserve of trust so that - when crises do arise - we can work effectively, and not run the risk of escalation through misunderstanding. Only by doing this can we reverse the current trends of escalating conflict and violent attacks that have been striking at the very core of our society.