

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD THROUGH CRISES

Ian Bremmer

“**W**HERE is the peace that the United Nations was created to guarantee?” That is the pointed question Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky asked the UN Security Council during a video speech on April 5th, 2022, in response to Russia’s war on his country. “Where is the security that the Security Council must guarantee?” he asked.

The urgency of his questions needs no explanation. Russian President Vladimir Putin has decided that Ukraine belongs to Russia, and there are no boundaries, treaties, or warnings that will prevent him from waging war to make it so. At this point, why should Ukraine’s President, or anyone else, have much confidence that the “international community” will stop this war?

More broadly, loss of faith in governing authorities is the defining story of our era. The United States, the only nation that can project military power into every region of the world, has become its most politically dysfunctional major power. A third of Americans say Joe Biden is not a legitimately elected President. Europeans have lost faith too. In 2016, the UK voted its way out of the EU, and anti-establishment, xenophobic parties of the far right shifted the politics inside many European states.

In fact, the entire international system is increasingly in question. China has advanced from impoverished to powerhouse over four decades and increasingly rejects the right of Western-led institutions to make and enforce global rules. Strongmen have emerged in Russia, India, Turkey, Brazil and even EU members Hungary

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Photo: Guiliver Image

*A rare case of comprehensive global cooperation
(vaccines being delivered to Tunisia as part of the COVAX program)*

and Poland to challenge principles of freedom of the press, democratic checks and balances, and minority rights. Few in any country have faith the UN can do much more than help care for and feed the refugees fleeing conflicts no one can resolve.

The UN and institutions like the World Bank and IMF were built atop the ashes of a war that ended 77 years ago. That is why Germany and Japan, wealthy and dynamic free-market democracies committed to multilateralism and the rule of law, had no seats at the table for Zelensky’s speech to the Security Council—while Russia did.

The international system is fundamentally broken. To fix it, the world needs a crisis. It was World War II that created institutions and alliances that helped keep the peace and invest in global development for decades after. True enough, our world has faced no shortage of shocks in recent years: the 2008 global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the 2015-2016 tidal wave of migrants into Europe, Brexit, and the rise of angry populists in Europe and America. But none of these events created a new sense of unity and purpose.

Then, the worst pandemic in 100 years hit and Russia invaded Ukraine.

Can these crises bolster dying institutions and create new ones?

PUTIN'S WAR

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has spawned the most significant geopolitical emergency since the end of the Cold War. War is killing civilians by the thousands, millions of refugees have headed west, NATO and Russia have moved to high alert, and fuel and food prices around the world have soared. The Russian government has even threatened the use of nuclear weapons and warned of World War III.

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Fast forward six months, and Ukraine remains mostly free. Putin's efforts to remove Zelensky have failed. And the United States and its allies mustered a far stronger response than any observer would have predicted. In terms of sanctions against Russia—the toughest ever placed on a G20 country—with meaningful sacrifice taken by nearly all EU member states. In terms of support for Ukraine, a country whose military spending is ten times smaller than that of Russia, now with NATO and other support set to nearly match it in 2022.

Before the war, NATO was adrift, “brain dead” according to French President Emmanuel Macron. During

his presidency, Donald Trump sometimes talked down NATO's value for US national security, and some of his former aides say he wanted to remove the United States from the alliance. The transatlantic relationship was weaker than ever and fragmenting. And after Iraq, Afghanistan, and the January 6th,

2021 insurrection in Washington, the ability of the United States to lead an international coalition was in question. Its willingness to lead was another unknown variable.

Now, NATO is revitalized, Europe is meeting its defense obligations, Finland and Sweden are about to join, and Emmanuel Macron now says that Putin's invasion has delivered an “electric shock” and “strategic clarification” for the alliance. Putin wanted to deal the alliance a death blow with a show of force and resolve in Ukraine. Instead, he seems to have strengthened it.

The shift in Germany is a big part of this story. The economic engine of Europe, with a government that has long tried to manage relations with Russia by cultivating cooperation through trade, has sharply changed its strategic direction in recent months. Three days after the Russian invasion, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced

during a historic speech to Parliament that Germany would send weapons to Ukraine, impose genuinely tough sanctions on Russia, and more than double German defense spending. His government announced in April 2022 that it would stop importing Russian oil by the end of this year.

The EU also has a renewed sense of mission. Scorned by Britain and chastised by populists within many member countries, the EU has been given new energy by the war. The governments of Hungary and Poland have openly rebelled against

its rules in recent years, but Russia's invasion has forced Hungary's Viktor Orban to curb his pro-Putin enthusiasm and presented Poland with a chance to play European hero by accepting millions of Ukrainian refugees.

Washington's pivot to Asia no longer feels like the Americans are leaving Europe behind. The June 2022 NATO summit in Madrid brought America's Asian allies to the table, and quiet but active negotiations are starting to expand the international security architecture through NATO and the G7 to create a new and more flexible alignment that unites the world's advanced industrial democracies.

If these developments were not striking enough, consider that Putin has even given America's Democrats and Republicans a sense of political unity that was best illustrated in March 2022 by a 424-8 vote in the House of Representatives to suspend normal trade

relations with Russia and its ally Belarus. Putin has achieved the nearly unimaginable in American politics: he has persuaded many Americans to hate him more than they hate their compatriots of the opposite party.

And even though China's President Xi

Jinping expressed his “friendship without limits” for Vladimir Putin, it has turned out that it is also a friendship without military support or much money. China does not want to fall afoul of western sanctions and values its economic relationship with the G7 much more than it does Xi's bromance with the Russian president.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine turned out to be a “goldilocks crisis”: not so big that we are crippled by it, not so small that we don't react to it, just right to compel meaningful positive change. The West completely agrees about the challenge and the evolution of the crisis has only sharpened the response.

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Of course, we must remain realistic. America, Europe, and the institutions that strengthen their partnership will face significant tests in the coming months and years. The United States is headed for yet another bitter election season ahead of the midterms in November. Americans and Europeans know that noted NATO skeptic Donald Trump may well become the Republican nominee in 2024. In Europe, the fallout from a likely prolonged military stalemate in Ukraine might change the political temperature. President Biden's calls for unity among democracies will antagonize both China and Russia as well as developing nations uninterested in entering the fray. And though China seems unlikely to jeopardize its economic future by entering a long-term struggle with top trade partners Europe and America just to help Russia, the longer-term challenges it will pose for Western values and interests are much bigger than anything Putin can muster.

In short, the Ukraine crisis has boosted some Western institutions that can strengthen democracy, the rule of law, and human rights at the expense of authoritarians—or at least the one who works in the Kremlin. Still, it will not resolve the larger crisis of confidence to solve common problems that ails us. That will require something bigger.

GLOBAL PANDEMIC(S)

This pandemic has created the biggest genuinely global crisis of our lives, and there were real breakthroughs in multinational cooperation. Scientists, public policy experts, and government leaders had been saying that the emergence of such a disease was inevitable. When it finally hit—and the world was largely unprepared—there was an enormous and nearly global effort to use science to develop better understanding and tools to fight the disease.

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Scientists shared ideas and information. Central bankers took complementary, if not coordinated, action to boost sagging economies. International lenders offered emergency help, and vaccines were developed at unprecedented speed via joint ventures. Without the COVAX project, for example, the problems of vaccine hoarding and inequality between rich and developing nations would have been even worse than they are. The willingness of some countries to export surplus vaccines—as the United States did for neighbors Mexico and Canada and the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia did for other countries—created a blueprint for shared sacrifice at a time of severe political and economic stress for all these countries.

Economic responses also brought people together. The United States, despite fierce displays of partisanship,

was able to put aside its differences to coordinate the most effective domestic fiscal response in the world. Trump's Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi worked together to ensure workers and businesses were not derailed by the disruption. Biden added more stimulus during a second COVID wave when he became president with a Democratic-majority House and Senate. These measures helped buffer the income shock and reduced inequality at a time when it was accelerating globally (though now there is a credible case that those same policies fueled inflation and post-pandemic political division).

At the government level, international cooperation was most successful in providing the world's poorest countries with economic support: advanced democracies and China agreed to transfer special drawing rights allocated from the IMF, reduced conditionality on existing loans, and helped some of the world's most economically stressed governments to avoid major financial crises. Those decisions were taken quickly and at scale.

The biggest geopolitical win came from Europe, which emerged from the pandemic politically stronger

than it came in. European leaders learned a lot from the last decade of global financial crisis, currency crises, and Brexit; recognizing a stronger Europe was essential for keeping their own houses in order. Taking a radically different approach from the pressure placed on Greece in 2010 to be accountable (and face a crippling depression), the wealthy European countries supported an unprecedented economic package to redistribute wealth to the poorer countries—a Marshall Plan for southern and eastern Europe—leading to much stronger

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support for Europe. The same was true for vaccines—Europe is bureaucratic and slow, and they were unwilling to pay “whatever it takes” for access, so their efforts to secure vaccines took longer than operation warp speed in the United States. However, the European response ensured everyone in Europe got vaccine access, ultimately leading to a stronger, more united Europe.

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic was not frightening enough to make us build a new system of global public-health cooperation. There has been too little global cooperation, and over 6 million people have perished thus far as a result. Few leaders recognized

that COVID-19 was a global threat that could never be effectively addressed without a global solution.

In the United States, a feeling developed among many—especially once vaccines became available—that the disease was not that big of a deal. It was downplayed as something primarily affecting the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions, which led to deep and politicized disagreement on how seriously to take it.

China, meanwhile, felt like it had a handle on COVID-19 early on—after initially covering it up—and thought the West was irresponsible and indifferent to the fate of their seniors, so it saw little reason to cooperate. But complacency about their low infection rates translated into a lack of urgency in vaccinating their elderly population. They accordingly got locked into a zero COVID policy, only to later end up with new variants and weaker vaccines, as well as an under-vaccinated elderly population. China's zero COVID policy is a big problem for them, but not big enough to turn to the West and ask for mRNA vaccines that work.

The developing world mostly got the short end of the stick. Developed countries ensured they got vaccines first and worried less about the emergence of new variants from the disease expanding unchecked among unvaccinated

populations (like in South Africa, where omicron exploded).

Ultimately, the pandemic was too small a crisis to force the kind of collaboration we needed. When the next deadly virus emerges, will we be better prepared?

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is the crisis that should give us the most hope. It is the emergency most likely to force world leaders to share more information, costs, and responsibilities because it creates disasters that can destroy the lives of hundreds of millions of people, with impacts felt in every region of the world. Here, as in other areas, mutual suspicion will limit American leadership and U.S.-China cooperation, but there are other actors that can lead.

Europe has already made genuinely historic progress. The so-called European Green Deal has boosted the continent as a leader on climate by committing unprecedented amounts of money toward the net-zero carbon-emissions goal. By making climate spending a central pillar of its most recent budgets and COVID-19 economic-relief plans, the European Commission has boosted its power to raise future funds for pandemic relief and climate change from reluctant member states. Only those that comply with EU standards on emissions and other climate—relevant policies can expect to get generous sup-

port for COVID recovery. It is also possible that Russia's war in Ukraine—and the need it creates to relieve European reliance on Russia for oil and gas—will spur large-scale investment in green technologies.

But progress is hardly limited to Europe. In fact, on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 195 countries signed on to a document that accepts the climate crisis as man-made. There is now a crucial global consensus on how much and how quickly the planet is warming, which parts of the world have been affected the most, and the scale and likelihood of long-term scenarios. The governments of the world's biggest polluters, including the United States and China, have committed to reducing their carbon emissions to net zero. Some of the world's biggest companies have offered their own public commitments. In short, climate change has presented an immediate, potentially crippling global problem that has forced many governments, the private sector, and civil-society organizations to work together. But there are big unanswered questions. A certain degree of warming has already become inevitable, and governments and private-sector lead-

ers need to accept and spend more on climate-adaptation strategies.

They also need to prepare for the economic—and, therefore, geopolitical—disruptions to come. EU leaders are

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currently working hard to end their dependence on Russian oil and natural gas. However, this is simply an acceleration of a process that global warming had already kickstarted. In coming years, as rising seas and violent storms command our attention and green energy technologies become more affordable, the governments of countries that remain dependent on fossil fuel exports will face collapse. As decarboniza-

tion strategies advance, these countries will export less oil and more turmoil.

The shift toward cleaner energy will transform longstanding fossil-fuel-based trade partnerships like those between China and Russia or the United States and Saudi Arabia. That trend will shift the balance of power across entire regions and stoke conflicts that must be contained. One of the most critical questions is how to prepare for a world with tens of millions of climate refugees. The political, economic, and humanitarian stakes could not be higher.

DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

There is another challenge that may also amount to a crisis. A wide range of disruptive new technologies is fundamentally changing our relationships with our governments and one another. These technologies are changing how we think and live, often in ways we do not understand.

Even at a time of pandemic, when millions of lives depend on scientists and doctors to develop new protections and treatments quickly, we do not inject large numbers of people with a new drug before testing it. We need to know how it will affect people, whether it will protect them, how long the protection will last, and what side effects it might have. But when new algorithms are developed that determine which ideas, information, and images will be ingested, how money will be spent, what products we will buy, and how we will interact with other people, no testing is done at all. Private companies are allowed to inject all this directly into the public bloodstream.

Consider the many other ways new technologies are transforming our lives. For example, they are already reinventing the skills needed to earn a living. We know that many workplaces are being automated, and robots are performing many jobs that people once held. A 2019 study from the Brookings Institution found that workers with graduate

or professional degrees will be almost four times as exposed to AI displacement in coming years as workers with a high school diploma.

New technologies are also changing warfare. In the coming age of autonomous weapons, war will more often be waged through buttons that push themselves—by calculating how and when to strike without human oversight. In addition, cyberweapons are far more likely to be used on a large scale than far more expensive and complex to use nuclear weapons. They have already been deployed with increasingly disruptive effects in recent years, and the emerging confrontation between Russia and the West will highlight their dangers.

It will also become even cheaper and easier for rogue states, or worse yet, non-state actors, to develop or acquire cyberweapons, which are easier to attain and harder to police and deter yet have nearly as much potential (and, soon, potentially more) to terrorize cities, take down economies, and bring war.

Quantum computing has moved from publicly shared research to a small number of companies (some supported by governments) bringing their efforts in-house, making it harder to assess comparative capabilities and the potential for game-changing breakthroughs. Many believe functional quantum

computers would make cryptographic security obsolete, rendering the most advanced national security systems vulnerable. What would happen if the United States or China were about to build such a capability? The logic for the other country to engage in a preemptive strike would be strong, lest they become irreversibly vulnerable.

Then there is the artificial intelligence revolution, with algorithms that programmers themselves do not understand being released into the “wild” and tested on populations in real-time. It is inconceivable that companies would be allowed to make such decisions around genetically modified food or new vaccines and therapeutics, but with AI algorithms, this is routine. Can a civil society continue to function in such an environment? Can democracies still be fit for purpose, or will centralized control in governance become the “new normal?”

The advance of disruptive technologies is the least well understood of all global crises today. Governments are the least prepared and resourced to

respond to it effectively. This, however, partly reflects the potential solution: technology companies themselves are principal actors, exercising sovereignty over the digital domain.

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The primary cause for optimism will not come from American leadership, hampered by bitter partisan divisions, or from U.S.-China cooperation, particularly in areas of fundamental ideological differences over individual rights. Fortunately, Europe is already playing a crucial regulatory role in some of these areas. EU leaders are using the size of the European market to set data use and privacy rules for the globe.

Still, the world's largest tech companies—Facebook, Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Apple—have far more power to effectively govern the digital space than any government does. Defending against—and even identifying—cyberattacks is increasingly and principally a matter for these technology companies. So is identifying disinformation and protecting populations from its dangers. Accordingly, tech companies are critical to creating policies, institutions, and global architec-

ture needed to respond to the crises of disruptive technologies. How effective the response is will depend in part on cooperation between governments and corporations, as well as on the global models the tech companies choose to align themselves with.

COOPERATION BEFORE AFFINITY?

There are crises already unfolding that will offer real opportunities to boost international cooperation—if we can learn from the mistakes of the recent past. Whether the crisis that must be addressed is a new Cold War, the next pandemic, the profound impacts of climate change, or the disruptive power of many new technologies, American leadership will remain limited by the bitter partisan infighting that makes the United States so dysfunctional, and mistrust will limit how Washington and Beijing can work together.

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But if they can form pragmatic partnerships in critical areas, there are others that can play vital roles in boosting global cooperation. The EU, in particular, has shown that alliances of like-minded countries can still offer big solutions to big problems in their common interest. There are also roles for the private sector, the international scientific community, and ordinary citizens in boosting cooperation.

Our decision-makers and influencers do not have to like one another, much less agree on a single set of political and economic values. They do not need to solve every problem. On the other hand, never has it been more evident that political leaders, the private sector, and citizens of all countries had better cooperate toward goals that we cannot achieve alone. History shows it is both necessary and possible. ●

“This is a time for solidarity, not divisiveness. Compassion, not xenophobia. Kindness not hatred. As #OneHumanity, we can fight the COVID-19 pandemic.”

H.E. Mr. Miguel Ángel Moratinos
High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

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