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Global Strategic Trends: Who 'is' We?

By Greg Mills

Synopsis

Demographics and absolute population numbers are a key global driver for the next 30 years. How these pressures are dealt with and energies harnessed will be crucial, as will the management of and access to natural resources. Here both the 'hard' aspect of technology and 'soft' dimension of governance will feature.

Commentary

Thinking ahead 30 years as to what might drive events and shape our choices and lives is an inherently fraught process. Yet it is possible to discern trends, whether these be technological, economic, social or political, by looking backwards thirty years and then to consider the next 30.

Six future issues stand out – Demographics, Natural Resources, Climate, Technology, Governance, and Identity. None of these issues is especially new, but the way in which they impact on the state and its relationship with people could be.

The absolute number of people relative to the availability of resources, their age cohort, where they live and what they might do if their expectations are not met, are all important inter-related drivers. Africa is at the epicentre of this particular challenge. By 2050, at current rates, Africa's estimated population then of two billion will have overtaken both India (projected to be 1.6 billion) and China (1.4 billion). As a result of this growth, not only will one person in five in the world then be African, but also one in four workers.

Demographic changes and growth dividend

Whether natural resources can be discovered and exploited at a pace and price that meets these aspirations is also important, as is the discovery and application of substitute technologies. Indeed, the tendency to see change and challenges as a threat should be guarded against. Just as Malthusian predictions have the world unable to cope with burgeoning populations and declining resources, it is not impossible to imagine a future where demographic changes offer a potential growth dividend in the right enabling conditions, and where the world enjoys relatively cheaper energy and food costs on account of new discoveries and improved efficiencies.

The regulation of the 'global commons' – from Antarctica through the high-seas to cyberspace – similarly offers an opportunity for co-operation and mutual benefit as easily as it could be a spark for conflagration. Finding the means and method of managing a wide range of areas from the environment to mining and transportation is not

going to be easy, not least since potentially great if narrow national interests are at stake.

We also know today also that climate change will produce winners and losers, though where and how depends in part at least on whether its causes are fully understood and thus can be mitigated. Some of these impacts can be imagined. Will, for example, water become not only contested, but a traded commodity with a global market price, and who might own and 'sell' it?

In terms of technology, after the broad shift in the last 100 years from steam to oil and then to ICT, will the next stage be solar - or knowledge-based, and what will the implication of this be? Here the impacts can be divided into a number of sectors, notably: energy (including the prospect of carbon capture and the emergence of alternate fuels), the impact on the human condition (with longevity becoming the norm, many diseases being eradicated or managed, and the technology/human interface becoming blurred from prosthetics to implants), and its overall pervasiveness.

How technology will change employment prospects, the relative exclusion of the poor from this world, and the extent to which individuals are willing to continue to accept the intrusion of communication in their lives, will all shape its impact. It could also shape loyalties, given that the provision of assistance from medical to security in this world may be beyond societies and governments but rather hinge on corporations.

Challenge of multiple and national identities

In assessing the range of impacts of new technologies and emergent trends, perhaps the most interesting question of all is how human interests might be governed 30 years hence. Rather than an overarching national identity, the advent of globalisation has emphasised the role of multiple and sometimes competing identities, in which country, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, setting (urban or rural), age, and gender all play a part, as before, but this time facilitated across borders by media and personal communication.

The impact of such drivers depends on the adaptability of societies, and how their effects are managed both between and within states. Contemporary experience is not especially heartening in this respect. The contemporary experience of the European Union suggests that regionalism might have reached its zenith. Thirty years ago Europe was in the midst of a process of integration, aiming at not only trade but political and monetary union. The latter two aspects have consistently run foul of national interests and politico-cultural habits, just as has been the case consistently with the United Nations. There is a nascent Euro-scepticism, which may strengthen the role of great powers which have historically been undermined by regionalism.

Yet if the last three decades teach us anything, it is that, contrary to the notion that globalisation has reduced sovereign powers it may in fact have increased them, especially for smaller countries. They are no longer simply objects of great power influence, but have a fresh range of options and opportunities. At the same time, the ability of the great powers to coerce or force other state to do things has eroded.

The influence of national governments and pervasiveness of national identities will depend of course on how states themselves respond to the changing milieu. Their task will be made more difficult in a world without economic growth, or where growth is much slower than the previous century, since the presence of an 'underclass' or extreme levels of inequality could undermine notions of 'belonging' and responsibility to national societies.

It is possible to imagine a perfect political and social storm ripe for revolution: The emergence of global elites apparently above national laws and tax regimes (so-called 'offshore aristocracies'), widespread perceptions of practices of corruption and patronage, an economically disenfranchised and stressed middle-class, the spread of technologies which further reduce employment prospects while improving longevity and living conditions for the privileged 'haves', and diminishing and increasingly expensive natural resources.

How these differences manifest and perceptions of inequality and unfairness are managed depends, too, on questions of identity – around which beliefs, values, systems and groups coalesce. Determining courses of action in this world in favour of new orders or old depends on where one sits and with whom one identifies – put differently, who 'is' we.

Dr. Greg Mills, Director of the Johannesburg-based Brenthurst Foundation, recently attended a discussion in the UK identifying Global Strategic Trends.