



NAVIGATING A MORE DANGEROUS AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE

BY PETER OLIVE

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The UK recently published the 7th edition of [Global Strategic Trends](#) (GST7), an early milestone in the new government's [Strategic Defense Review](#). An initiative of the last Labour government, GST provides geostrategic context to inform strategic reviews conducted every four to five years. Over its 21 years, GST has also become used around the world, with several nations now participating in the program and many more collaborating with it.

Edition 7 is the most comprehensive yet, covering all global regions, the shared spaces (oceans, Arctic, Antarctic, space and cyber-space), as well as emerging trends in societies, economies, the environment, technology, conflict and security. The new edition is also far more geostrategic than its predecessors, reflecting a world that has [changed significantly](#) since Labour last came to power in 1997. GST7 has been developed with this more dangerous and uncertain future in-mind.

Global population growth has been a major driver of that change, set to reach 10 billion by 2055, a fourfold increase since World War II. This has already driven the emergence of new economic and military powers. Yet a historic moment is also approaching whereby Russia, many countries in East Asia, and much of Europe will go into [population decline](#), while Africa, along with South and Southeast Asia may continue to grow rapidly. The balance of economic power could

therefore change further as new countries capitalize on youth bubbles to expand productive and service capacities. Competition among developed nations to attract workers could also increase, although rising legal and illegal migration may also exacerbate existing social, economic and political pressures.

With global demand set to [increase](#), the geopolitics of energy could change profoundly. While hydrocarbons will remain a major source for the foreseeable future alongside nuclear energy, the [renewable transition](#) could change the landscape dramatically. While positive in terms of carbon emissions, this transition also brings new challenges. These include: an expansion of infrastructure in already congested and contested lands and [seas](#); competition over renewable technologies and markets; and access to the [critical minerals](#) required to make these technologies, bringing new global regions into focus. For example, 60% of the world's currently identified [lithium deposits](#), an essential component for batteries, is under Latin America, while access to these resources is already impacting [security](#) in other regions.

While estimates vary regarding how much innovations in 3-D printing and automation will drive an onshoring of manufacturing, most economists expect the majority of products to continue to be made as they are now—along extended value chains spanning the world. New [emerging nations](#) poised to take on the mantle of the "world's factory," however, mean overall patterns of global trade could [change significantly](#) by mid-century as new routes and [ports](#) open in the coming decades. A diversification of supply chains due to increasing geopolitical tensions could alter these configurations further.

Demands for commodities could also increasingly drive competition into the shared spaces. Significant deposits of critical minerals and [hydrocarbons](#) under the poles and across the [ocean floors](#) could see new races to mine these fragile ecosystems emerge, placing increasing strain on the international treaties that protect them. Global food demand is also expected to increase by [50% by 2055](#), creating increasing pressures for land farming and on the seas, including through [illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing](#).

Meanwhile, the race for high-tech leadership and control of digital standards and protocols is already growing, particularly given the dual-military potential of many of these technologies. The expansion of digital communications and services, however, also poses new potential risks. Artificial intelligence, for example, could prove both the [great disruptor](#) of traditional work as well as create new forms of employment, with significant implications for economic and social stability. Digital infrastructure is also proliferating around the world. More satellites were [launched in the first six months of 2022 than during the previous 60 years](#), for example, largely by commercial actors. Subsea cable networks, already carrying [95%](#) of global internet traffic, continue to expand particularly [in the southern hemisphere](#). These crucial networks will be increasingly important to how the world functions, but also ever more vulnerable to accidents, as well as cyber and physical attack.

Cutting across these drivers will be the more frequent, violent and permanent impacts of climate change. This coincides with growing populations increasingly [moving to coastal urban areas](#), the very regions most likely to be impacted by rising seas and more damaging storms. In addition, impacts to [critical national infrastructure](#) could become more prevalent and damaging. Meanwhile as ice melt opens up the [possibility of new trading lanes](#) across the Arctic, traditional routes like the Panama Canal are already being [impacted](#) by changing temperatures. Drought and storms could see [millions becoming climate refugees](#) in the coming decades, while the viability of some coastal regions and small island states may increasingly be challenged. More recently scientists have warned that some climate tipping points could be [reached by mid-century](#), which could change weather patterns dramatically.

Near universal ownership of portable electronic devices combined with ubiquitous internet access will make the world [increasingly connected](#) but also more aware of rising inequality. While in the coming decades humankind will push further into space, the depths of the oceans and the mysteries of life, the benefits of these breakthroughs are unlikely to be available to all. During the pandemic, for example, the

world witnessed [reversals](#) in the indices of human betterment that had hitherto risen for decades. During that same period, however, [131 global billionaires doubled their wealth](#). As a result, the state, as well as current systems of economic management and governance are increasingly being questioned in some regions.

Combined, these pressures mean the future of geopolitics and security look increasingly uncertain. While major powers in Europe, East Asia, the US, China, and Russia seem likely to remain significant actors, the global balance of power is set to become more congested and contested in the coming decades. That could see rising medium and small powers taking a more prominent role in global affairs in the future. Pressures on states, however, could also create gaps in governance for other actors to exploit. That includes violent extremism of all types, as well as transnational criminal gangs. With digital, space and other technologies playing an ever more prominent role in how states function, the corporations and the elites that own these assets could also become more powerful global actors.

At the same time the future trajectory of any power is looking increasingly uncertain. Previous assumptions that China will become the world's No. 1 economy, for example, now look less certain. Russia's fortunes hang on the outcome of its illegal war in Ukraine, as well as the price China might extract for continued support. The US may face an increasing array of international demands, even if it avoids a turn back to isolationism. All of which has more than a "rhyme" of history about it.

But if global order is less certain than at any time [since the end of the Cold War](#), what are the alternatives? GST7 offers five scenarios. Their purpose is avoid developing strategies based only on a preferred future, often a common approach, but instead be ready for less palatable world orders as well as the types of actions that might avoid them.

The first is that some future existential crisis sees the world turn again to multilateral solutions. It is the type of world the UN Secretary General has called during his [Summit for the Futures](#). Alternatively, the current

rules-based international order endures, albeit increasingly competed. Yet growing rivalry could also see the world divided into competing “spheres of influence” in which major global powers dictate the terms of trade, diplomacy, and security to states in their orbit. Not quite another Cold War given the interconnections of trade and other issues, such a world might more resemble the systems of global governance dominating the 19th and early 20th centuries. That arrangement could of course lead to yet more devastating wars, and edition 7 is the first GST to consider the possibility of another conflict at a global scale. Alternatively, a succession of crises could place states under increasing pressure, with other actors then taking a more prominent role in global affairs.

As the new UK government prepares to deliver the outcome of its SDR next year, it will therefore need to account for all these possible futures. With the clock counting down on potential new crises atop ongoing wars in the Euro-Atlantic and Middle East, however, it may not have long to act to shape a future beneficial to all.

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