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The latest in our occasional series of expert comment and analysis, by General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

Leadership On The Edge Of Extinction

As 2023 concludes, few will dissent from the conclusion that this has been a very tough year for life on planet Earth. Extreme weather, humanitarian catastrophe, economy-wrecking inflation, the Covid inquiry, war in its most visceral form in Ukraine and now Gaza; things could be better.

It would feel more convivial if it was just a blip in an otherwise generally upwards trend for life as Homo sapiens. We are a mostly ingenious and optimistic species, though our optimism is perhaps too reliant on prodigious denial and finding comfort in transient distractions. It can be raining acid, but there is always a dopamine hit available from TikTok. But what if today is not a blip, what if 2023 is a harbinger of Homo sapiens slipping down the slope to gratuitous, self-inflicted extinction?

The good news, in a way, is that Governments, think tanks, and industry – in fact leaders in

all walks of life – have broadly coalesced around how our world is becoming very much harder, and that the relative certainty and comfort of the post-Cold War era has passed. Our leaders talk about a combination of risks posing existential challenges to global security, prosperity, and values. Yet then they prefer tinkering with the symptoms to major surgery, maybe fearing that we, the citizenry, will punish them at the ballot box for overdoing the dosage of painful change the risks really demand.

This conversation about risk usually starts with the implications of the rise of Asia as the centre of global power in this century, and of China especially. A world dominated by the US as the single Superpower, of global institutions such as the UN and the World Bank looking to establish 'the' Rules-based International Order, and where liberal democracy and free markets inexorably prevail, has slipped into history. Obviously not a change made in one day, but now we must wrestle with the implications of a multipolar



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world. This is a conversation between US-led liberal democracies and China-led autocratic capitalists, with the rest of the world looking on and wondering whether they need to choose - and if so which side. It is an unpleasant and discouraging surprise in many Western capitals that quite so much of the world is not intoxicated with the western model, taking money and political cues from the other camp.

The recent meeting between President Biden and President Xi affirmed this competition is on, and thankfully that it need not become more of a confrontation than it already is. It could still be badly handled or tipped into chaotic escalation by Harold Macmillan's 'events, dear boy, events'. It is neither a given nor implausible to talk of a Thucydides Trap ahead, noting that over history in 12 out of 16 occasions when a rising power has eclipsed a fading power, there has been war.

The talk of war is focused today on China's clear intent to absorb Taiwan. Perhaps exactly because it does receive so much attention, the future of Taiwan may not come to blows, but there are other potential schisms available to provoke confrontation becoming the conflict that ripples around the globe.

The most likely is from the instability that accompanies global population growth and climate change. As we (*Homo sapiens*) have decided that it is too hard to prevent global temperatures rising no more than 1.5C above pre-industrial levels by 2050, we are focusing on the adaptation necessary to accommodate its effects. It is (possibly conservatively) likely that temperature will rise by perhaps 2-4C by

2100. The price increase for the remaining skiing in the Alps will be outrageous, but it could also mean: sea levels rising by 2m by 2100, causing hundreds of millions of people who live on coastlines to move; more intense hurricanes; and enough drought and desertification to destroy the agriculture and functioning civil society of entire countries. Shocks such as this will fracture relations within and between states as the humanitarian consequences bear down on the stability of the global order. Climate-induced crisis will be the tableau on which the multipolar world competes for stability, security and prosperity.

Along with the ascent of China and the fraying of the planet, we also wrestle with the risks and opportunities of the Digital Age. So much of this is clearly beneficial: enormous strides in healthcare, new heights of industrial productivity, unbounded spread of knowledge, and new progress in space. There will also be huge displacement as traditional industries and occupations are blown aside by artificial intelligence and robotics. We have been here before, the steam engine displaced many traditional employments even as it created new ones, but in this century the displaced will feel they have a right to matter, they cast votes and find their voices and organisation via their mobile phones. Necessary change will be hard and resisted.

The Digital Age has a dark side, some from unintended consequence and some by design. The bio scientists working on AI-driven personally tailored healthcare are also unintentionally developing technology that



may create pathogens without immunity. The facial recognition technology that tells a shop assistant our name and preferences as we come through the door is also a system that could be used for mass surveillance. In learning to combine data in the cloud, AI, robotics, and autonomy, mankind has created transport technology that can be weaponised as Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS).

What really happens next in our world depends partly on events and mostly on how competently our leaders (political, official and military) perform. They will have to manage this 'doom trilogy' of the frictions of a multipolar world, a fragile planet, and rapidly advancing combinations of new technology. By any standards, these risks have the potential for creating existential peril and almost all states will look for security in collective arrangements with their allies and partners. That should be reassuring, but dividing the world between powerful armed camps, each struggling with the dangers to their continued functioning has its challenges. Sometimes keeping good company makes taking bad decisions easier.

If we are not just living through an uncomfortable blip in an otherwise improving situation for humanity, what are we dealing with? Perhaps we are now confronting factors that could bring the tenure of Homo sapiens as the dominant animal on planet Earth to an unnecessary and certainly annoyingly premature conclusion?

It's not a new factor, but as a species we really are prepared to fight to the death for

the things that we believe to be necessary or true, especially when we see them as eternal and exclusive of other ways of thinking. This has been about religion (and it still is today), land (and it still is today) and political science (and it still is today). We hold ideas in our heads without empirical evidence or any connection to the physical world, they exist entirely in our belief, intellect or interest. Sometimes they are driven by identity, such as family, community, race, religion or nationality. We argue that our thing is the only thing, even to the extent that those who do not agree with us are 'others', somehow less than human. This is a feature of the struggles in Ukraine and Gaza today, and is always part of the nature of war.

What is new, at least in part, is that the competitions today over competing -ologies, -ocracies, faiths, and -isms may be prosecuted with new weapons that we neither fully understand nor control, yet are capable of wiping us out. Nuclear weapons have been with us since 1945, of course, but not nuclear weapons, bioweapons, cyber weapons, LAWS, or fleets of precision conventional missiles that are connected to artificial intelligence-driven control systems. So today we could be tempted to fight to the death for the things that we believe, with weapons that we don't fully understand or control and which could destroy all human life on Earth. This is an uncomfortable aspect of the way that the Digital Age is transforming defence and security equipment, organisation, and method in the most profound way for over 150 years.

The risk of state and blocs competing and fighting for survival today are substantially



greater as we live on a planet that can no longer endure our abuse and expectations without consequences. Creating growth and prosperity can no longer be underwritten by finding more resources to consume and then dump the waste in the sky, the earth, or the sea. A sustainable global future means forgoing some of what we really like. This is in the best interests of generations as yet unborn, though unable to cast a vote or complain if short-changed. A world of 8 billion residents, each regarding themselves as somehow quite special, requires a different approach to sharing the planet than exists in 2023. Absent agreement to make these immense changes, we will be left with the prospect of fighting hard for a bigger slice of the remaining earthly spoils. As that fight intensifies over time the risk of mutual oblivion may rise.

Which brings us to our proven limitations as a species (so far anyway). The record of the primacy of Homo sapiens on this planet is quite mixed. Around 200,000 years of hunter-gathering seems in hindsight to have been pretty joyful, unless taken ill, but it led to the extinction of most other mammals big enough to eat or skin.

The agrarian period from about 12,000 years ago brought us many benefits, but at a steep price in reduced biodiversity and with some costs from humans living in close proximity: disease, inequality and social cohesion. It is no longer so easy to move away from people you feel driven to kill (a thought that strikes many gathered for Christmas).

From about 1500 or so we reaped first the Enlightenment, and then the astonishing

progress in science and technology that brought us the Industrial Revolution. It has been especially crazy since the 19th Century, including developing the means and vigour to explode the global population from 1.6bn in 1900 to perhaps 8.6bn in 2030. It has led us to the Anthropocene, where the planet (still the only one we have so far) is so very significantly affected by our tenure that our lease may not be extended much more.

Perhaps we forget that beneath the glamorous leisure wear of the modern world lurks a mammal. We know we share 98% of our DNA with the chimpanzee and the bonobo, and no amount of Radio 4 focusing our minds on higher matters overturns that we make a bad job of not being animals. The 2% that sets us apart has done many brilliant things: split the atom, created the Internet, mastered open-heart surgery, created chocolate, etc. It has also led us to gamble, stuffed the Internet with porn and 6.5 billion cat pictures, and given us cocaine. It is the same 2% that creates the mixed bag of ideas and beliefs for which we are prepared to fight to the death.

As a species we are predisposed not to give up the joys of the moment, to forgo consumption and freedoms now in order to ward off putative future harm. We identify that things really must change and then do nothing – and we are suckers for slogans and tokens in lieu of real effort. We much prefer sacrifices to be made by others, particularly the others we don't know who live out of sight somewhere else in the world. We like to dwell on the power of our intellect, yet so many of our decisions are still driven by our



biology from pre-history. As animals, we may occasionally allow our genitals to prevail over our capacity for reason and judgement, and by no means is this confined to the Palace of Westminster.

So what, really, are the odds that 21st century Homo sapiens will find a path through fighting to the death for old ideas, with new weapons we struggle to control, on a planet we can no longer abuse, in order to find sustainable, equitable solutions for a bigger population of anxiously competing blocs? Is this the dinner party discussion 'du jour': will Homo sapiens make it, or 100 years from now will a still-smoking Earth be dominated by rats and ants? Suddenly, a 999-year lease looks less of a bargain.

It need not end badly, of course. The 2% that understands the perils that we face knows that we hold the solution in our own hands. A brighter future than oblivion demands leaders rise above the marginal and the irrelevantly photogenic. If winning elections means only satisfying a slim majority with free bread and circuses we deserve to die out. We are surely capable of framing the risks and opportunities we face, finding the solutions, accepting that they do require very painful, urgent changes in behaviour and expectations, and getting on with doing them. A life of perfect individual freedom,

prosperity without effort, contentment by right, and impregnable security is just not available.

For the UK and almost all other countries, our security, prosperity and values rely on succeeding in this very difficult global conversation. Silence or denial means being marginalised and diminished by the greater, mobilised powers of others asserting their position. This is not an argument for war, but for our leaders to play an appropriate part in the collective global response that must change how we coexist and cooperate, rather than meekly cooperating in a drift to extinction. It requires good followership too, as we all participate in adjusting how we coexist better, living, producing, trading and consuming in ways our planet can handle. To cite the philosopher Marshall McLuhan: 'there are no passengers on spaceship Earth, only crew.'

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