

Paradox of Progress: Global Trends for the next few years

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Every four years, the US National Intelligence Council produces a Global Trends report for the incoming president, describing the trends and challenges the world will face in the medium term. Last week the latest report was presented under the title “Paradox of Progress: Global Trends and Key Implications Through 2035”. The report covers trends in the areas of demographics, the economy, technology, social connectivity, government, the changing nature of conflicts, climate and the environment. The advantage of this type of multi-discipline analysis is that it takes account of factors of various different kinds evolving within the same dynamic and complex system.

One of the paradoxes within demographic and economic trends is that the rich are ageing, but the poor are not. Thus while working-age populations will continue to shrink in wealthy countries, China and Russia, they will continue to grow in the poorest countries of Asia and Africa, increasing economic, employment, urbanisation and welfare pressures and spurring migration. Weak growth in the developed countries may endanger the continuation of the rapid decline in poverty seen in developing countries in the past few years, which indeed has been spectacular.

Technology will continue to favour progress, while at the same time causing “discontinuities”. Technological advances will create new opportunities but will aggravate divisions between winners and losers. Meanwhile, automation and artificial intelligence will threaten to change industries faster than governments can adjust, thus stoking conflict between the most advanced companies and regulations.

The contrast between weak growth and rapid advances in global connectivity will lead to tensions within and between different societies. Populism will increase on both the right and the left, threatening traditional liberalism. While some leaders will appeal to nationalism to shore up control, others will rely on other factors such as religion. In any case, authoritarianism may well increase. The advance of women within power structures will be increasingly evident.

Governing will become ever more difficult for the political class, as the disconnect between what people see and want and what they actually get becomes more evident. The demand for security and prosperity will contrast with governments’ reduced revenues, increased distrust and polarisation. Technology will expand the range of players that can block or circumvent traditional politics in a world in which the “global awakening” will be increasingly evident. In this context, political order will be ever more elusive, and tensions may heighten until society and the political class renegotiate their expectations of one another.

Climate change, the environment and health issues will demand greater attention. While tensions connected to climate change will increase, increased travel and poor health infrastructure in some countries may lead to an increase in infectious diseases. Pressure and stresses on resources such as water will replace conflicts about fossil fuels in the future.

All these trends will come about at an unprecedented speed and will alter the nature of power. In essence, the ability to govern and international cooperation will become more and more difficult. The economic, technological and security trends will increase the number of countries, individuals and organisations whose actions may have significant consequences. Geopolitics too will be affected. Post-Cold War unipolarity will give way to a multipolar world, while the post-WWII international order may start to fade too. Some powers may well seek to assert their influence through conventional force, but even this may no longer work. Nothing more nor less than trends old and new, all moving at top speed and all interconnected. There is nothing for it but to adapt as best we can to the new “paradox of progress”.

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