



Leadership for Responding to Changing Geopolitical Realities

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Recent years have seen a return to great power rivalry and geopolitical competition, which has been the norm over the centuries, with many contemporary leaders recognising that assumptions from the era of internationalisation and multilateral international institutions no longer apply^{1,2}. Two permanent and veto wielding members of the UN security council have now launched unprovoked wars of choice against other states. They have carried out a variety of activities that appear to be in contravention of the UN charter, both international and humanitarian law, and the Geneva Convention. Why have they ignored previous diplomatic norms? What are the implications for risk, leaders and leadership?

We seem to have entered a period of disruption, upheaval,

uncertainty, insecurity and instability in which previous assumptions and expectations about loyalties, obligations and the behaviour of others may no longer apply. The consequences are affecting the daily lives of people around the world. Wars and increased military preparedness can be expensive. They must be paid for by additional taxation or borrowing and can disrupt supply chains, increase inflation and the prices of essentials, and add to budgetary pressures and affordability concerns. Increases in the pump cost of petrol or diesel are early harbingers of future strains.

The worst may be yet to come. The current era of great power politics in an anarchic, uncertain and militarised world has long been foreseen³. The steady accumulation of

power and influence by certain leaders of powerful states has also been clear, although it has often been overlooked or ignored. Their blatant disregard of balanced advice, rational considerations and the impacts of their actions on others has perhaps been underestimated. This should not surprise given the preoccupation of boards and national decision makers with immediate issues and inadequate collective action on existential threats.

Geopolitical Challenges and Uncertainties

In recent years, risks have crystalised, latent differences have surfaced, simmering issues have boiled over, taboos have been broken, hybrid wars have become hot and elections have been held. There are geoeconomic and geopolitical challenges and crises for leaders to handle, as well as environmental and technological risks and existential threats to navigate. How should decision makers and those with influence respond? What positions could they consider, discuss and adopt? The World Economic Forum ranks geoeconomic confrontation (involving tariffs) and state-based armed conflict as two geopolitical global risks that appear in the top five listed in order of their expected impacts for this year and next⁴.

Many people, organisations, communities and countries are exposed and insecure. Before it was closed, some 20–25% of global seaborne oil and 20% of liquefied natural gas flowed through the strait of Hormuz. Strikes on desalination plants and other facilities around the Gulf could make some areas unliveable. Increasing security and deterring aggression requires time and investment. The open use of hard power by UN Security Council members, hot and hybrid warfare, open rivalry among great powers and pervading insecurity resulted in global defence expenditure rising to \$2.63 trillion in 2025⁶. Certain disputes, conflicts and hybrid and hot wars have involved nuclear armed states. Along with others, they might also possess the capability to develop and/or use chemical and/or biological weapons.

Resources devoted to defence cannot be used for climate adaptation or addressing global warming exacerbated by wars. Many contemporary geopolitical developments now occur in circumstances different from the recent past. In today's international context, certain key players refuse to be constrained by laws, conventions and norms that are generally accepted. They are prepared to compete and engage in activities that may, and repeatedly violate, international law, humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Charter. They reject scientific and relevant expertise, reject scientific consensus and exclude or remove those giving

The Rise of Autocrats

Certain autocrats and leaders refuse to be constrained by constitutional limits in the pursuit of what they consider their country's narrow national security, despite the limitations of drawing their own experience. However, the consequences may be borne by many other people. They pressure, victims of their actions, affected directly or indirectly by their actions. Restraint might once have protected

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The impulsive can come unstuck. They may initiate action without a plan B or a fall-back position. Following instincts, inflexibility, and a failure to consider alternatives, other possibilities and different outcomes and/or scenarios can be costly. It may lead to situations from which extraction becomes difficult. Due to incomplete information, inadequate preparation, limited foresight, an absence of effective challenge, or naivete about how others might respond, events may not evolve as planned. Opponents should not be underestimated. The warnings of allies ought to be heeded. Impatience, inadequate resourcing and overuse of initial capability can strengthen the position of opponents and harden their resolve.

Hubris can lead to over-extension⁶. The initiator of a war of choice may suffer a loss of trust and moral authority. A standing that has taken years to build could be quickly lost. Autocrats can be surrounded by bootlickers, crawlers and toads, who echo their views and support whatever they wish to accomplish. In the absence of challenge, they may give inadequate thought to what they start. Used to getting their own way, lacking experience and emboldened by quick win deals they might be ill equipped to play a long game. In time they could cede advantage to those who wait until an opportunity arises to show



politics. Hard power is exercised. Putin's Russian Federation is mired in its illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. The US which once supported the rules based international order has also initiated a war of choice on the order of President Trump. It is disrupting rather than leading and no longer trusted by many who previously regarded it as a dependable ally.

Adjusting to a Changed World Order

The world order is in a state of flux and changing, and organisations and their leaders are having to adapt². The consistency and stability that many business leaders have sought may now be transitory at best, and relationships can no longer be relied upon. The conduct of major powers is emulated by those who follow the lead of the super-powers and/or associate with one of them. Arms control arrangements are eroded. With previous protection umbrellas disappearing, nations are seeking fresh arrangements, more arms, and new weapons, and new arms

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“*Certain autocrats and leaders with authoritarian leanings refuse to be constrained by constitutional provisions and principles in the pursuit of what they consider advances their own and their country's narrow national self-interests.*”

and deals, it might be prudent to prepare for the worst in some other players. Timing can be important. Alternatives, replacements or successors might be less favourable. While not wanting to act prematurely, procrastination should be avoided. Combinations of impatience, inadequate preparation, ego, selfishness, or the regular ignoring of advice and/or constraints could be warning signs. Extra vigilance, anticipation of possibilities and preparation for certain eventualities might be required. An entity could be disadvantaged by future moves.

In a transactional era, the outcomes of certain conflicts and deals can be uncertain. Great power rivalries may unfold or play out. It might be worth assessing the cards contending parties hold and gaming the hands they could play. Inviting key executives to adopt certain roles and act out possible scenarios could increase their awareness of risks and possible outcomes and enhance their sensitivity to different probabilities. They will need to confront uncertainty, cope with unpredictability and resist pressure. Rationality, veracity, social and environmental responsibility, and concern for the public good may have to be worked for.

Recognising and Addressing Realities

The extent of ruthlessness, stupidity and venality should not be underestimated. Key players may have little regard for the welfare of others and prioritise their political survival and the interests of supporting cliques. Wide gulfs can exist between rhetoric and intentions. Certain behavioural characteristics, such as attention spans or how much collateral damage, discomfort or frustration might be endured, may be discernible. Knowing what drives an opponent or competitor, and what pressures and/or constraints they are under can be helpful.

These might include obligations to an electorate or financial backers. Terms of office and election dates can be significant. They may influence behaviours and affect outcomes.

Many decision makers, CEOs and national leaders walk on metaphorical tightropes and eggshells. Accommodating, tolerance, diplomacy and avoidance of contradiction and criticism may embolden powerful bullies. Standing up to them could be risky and harm those for whom a leader is responsible. If ethics, morality, past conventions, norms and legacy rules are ignored, the discretion a leader might have and respect shown to them may depend on indicators of hard power. Military capabilities, economic strength, technological edge and critical resources can be exaggerated, and unity, resilience and staying power misjudged.

Telling authoritarian leaders what they would like to hear or do can reinforce their views. It may lead them to overestimate the capability of their military and/or economy to achieve their aspirations. It might cause them to miscalculate opposition and the reactions and defences of others. While ostensibly inferior, a target may be better able to endure hardship and prepared for asymmetric warfare. When leading powers commit, their weaknesses and dependences may soon become apparent to others. Supplies of munitions quickly run down in an initial attack may take years to replace. Canny actors take advantage of disruptions. They may advance their interests while bigger beasts lock horns and exhaust themselves.

Agility, Flexibility and Intelligent Adaptation

Size is not everything. Capabilities may not be current or relevant. In the previous era, some small states such as Singapore performed well in terms of standards of living or technological excellence. Prospering in our current era is likely to require agility, flexibility and intelligent adaptation if they are to continue to achieve levels of development that elude some larger entities¹¹. Relative positions can quickly change depending upon reactions to geopolitical developments. With so many players concerned about what they might lose, more thoughtful and calculating ones may see opportunities to reposition and make gains.

The blatant pursuit of self-interests may make most people, the environment, many other species and future generations worse off. Deal makers sometimes seem to exist in a zero-sum world. When negotiating, they aim to gain at the expense of other players and win regardless of externalities and collateral damage inflicted upon the environment and our planet's eco-systems. Replicating success in a different context can be problematic. Greater uncertainty, instability and insecurity is creating fresh interest in adaptive leadership¹². The qualities sought in political leaders, directors and senior executives of companies affected by global events in a changed international system might require review.

Electorates, selectors, and nomination committees may opt for those whose attitudes, behaviours and qualities reflect requirements for effectively playing new and different games. Future survival could depend upon whether the benefits of corporate inspired innovation will outweigh the impacts of negative externalities and the unwelcome disruptions caused by certain political leaders. Influencers could have an important role to play in responding to challenges such as climate change

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and energy transition. As issues, risks and threats facing boards, and political leaders and their supporting cliques, accumulate and become more inter-related, greater attention will need to be given to geopolitics and international relations.

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