



Africa in the World

Wildcards and Megatrends: Great power implosion, technology and climate change

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The four scenarios presented in this study and the associated African scenarios could be upended by any number of developments, particularly the impact of a **great power implosion**, **regional developments** in Europe or Asia, and **technology**, generative artificial intelligence in particular.

In *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*, Barbara F Walter presents internal conflict and competition within big powers as one of the gravest threats to global peace, particularly the likelihood of a second civil war in the US. Academic reviews of her work indicate that she has exaggerated the threat posed by political polarisation in the US. For example, [Moyer, Matthews and others](#) find that wealthier, politically consolidated states (all of which are democratic) typically have more civil conflict onset associated with minority repression, not evident in the US, than any other cluster of motivated variables.

The US is already starkly divided and increasingly violent, as seen in January 2021 with the effort at an unconstitutional power grab after Donald Trump lost the presidential elections. The re-election of Trump as the 47th president in 2024 means that the West is in deep trouble, as seen from the perspective of a partnership amongst liberal democracies to constrain China's growing power and influence. Already evident early in 2025, Trump's approach to the rest of the world will strengthen the hand of autocrats everywhere, undermine the global rules-based system and eventually accelerate the relative loss of power and influence of the US. It will accelerate the trend toward a Divided World or even the World at War scenario but could open up the door towards a Growth World should the US pursue a Grand Bargain with China.

A variant of **great power implosion** in China and Russia would likely follow democratisation in either or both. In the case of Russia, which will experience a steady diminution of its material power base in all scenarios, disruptive change is almost sure to follow the end of the presidency of Vladimir Putin, who has ruled since 1999. While change in both countries, also in North Korea, and the democratisation of oil-rich Middle Eastern countries may be desirable from a liberal and normative perspective, all will likely come with considerable negative economic consequences. In the case of China, these will be global.

The correlation between [income and democracy](#) is contested, but, according to a significant body of work, democracy becomes very likely beyond certain [income levels](#). If that theory holds, the Chinese Communist Party and many countries in the Middle East will soon be in trouble. The democratisation of China (i.e., replacing the current authoritarian model with a political system that provides for greater individual choice and freedoms) will almost inevitably be violent and economically disruptive. Chinese growth rates differ per scenario, although steadily declining in all four as its economy matures and its population ages. It is highest in the Sustainable World, averaging 4% per annum from 2024 to 2043, implying that this scenario would present China with the earliest associated challenge.

Regional developments could also alter the world in substantive ways, such as the breakup of the EU or a radical reduction in its membership. The UK has already left the EU. At regular intervals, others threatened the same, although Russia's war on Ukraine and the damage that Brexit did to the UK has reduced threats of similar endeavours by others. China's economy is already larger than the EU27 in terms of purchasing power parity and market exchange rates. Given reasonable expectations of Chinese vs EU27 economic growth rates, this gap will increase in future, although the West remains significantly larger as a single group than others. The EU further serves as an essential advocate of a rules-based international order on matters ranging from consumer protection to human rights. A breakup of the EU will have significant adverse effects globally. On the contrary, substantial enlargement with the UK rejoining the EU, including other countries such as Türkiye or a democratic Russia, could unlock positive opportunities.

Should Asians set their differences aside, strengthen their political cooperation and overcome the deep divisions between countries such as Japan, Korea, India and China, Asia would become globally dominant, and a vastly different international order may emerge. However, that is unlikely, given the tensions between China, India and Japan. Historically, two adjacent

large powers (China and India) compete rather than cooperate, and relations between these two are tense. More likely, Japan and others will enter closer ties with India as a bulwark against China.

The complex and unpredictable ways that environmental changes are intertwined with development and security illustrate how the biosphere crisis can only be successfully addressed through international cooperation. Europe recently experienced its worst drought in 500 years, much of Pakistan was under water, and portions of Africa are facing long-term distress with massive suffering and loss of life. Beyond Africa's needs, the window for global action to respond to these challenges is closing.

The accelerated impact of environmental change is undoubtedly the most significant threat to humanity, particularly in poorer regions with less capacity to cope. Catastrophic climate-change 'tipping points', for example, are nearing — from surging sea levels as polar ice melts to spiking temperatures as methane escapes from permafrost — that would drive an unstoppable cycle of higher global temperatures and more melting. Africa is particularly vulnerable due to its weak adaptive capacity, increased dependence on ecosystems for livelihoods, and rain-fed agriculture. Currently, the continent is warming faster than the rest of the world, on average, and scientists warn that large portions of Africa may become uninhabitable by mid-century or earlier. Variations in rainfall are significant, and extreme weather events are becoming more regular. Globally, the accelerated impact of climate change is the most likely driver that could unlock the current geo-political impasse towards a Sustainable World. We examine these trends in a separate [Climate theme](#).

Technological innovation is a structural driver of change, but the advent of generative **artificial intelligence** and its potential unintended consequences could become a wildcard. Particularly in the Divided World, World at War, and Growth World scenarios, aggressive state or private sector competition could lead to a race to the bottom, with the rapid development of autonomous killer systems and a lack of regulation and control. Even in the Sustainable World, the extent to which a comprehensive regulatory regime could be pursued is debatable, given the technology's rapid evolution.

The challenge is twofold. On the one hand, 'rather than creating jobs and opportunities for the majority of the population in poor and middle-income countries, the current path of AI is raising the demand for capital, highly skilled production workers, and even higher-skilled services, such as management-consulting and tech companies'^[1]

On the other hand, digital tools are used for massive data collection and processing - potent assets in both autocratic governments and private companies alike that are interested in surveillance and the dependence upon big data for social control and their business model, respectively. The power of generative Artificial Intelligence in today's connected yet dividing world is such that the World Economic Forum's [Global Risks Report 2024](#) identifies **misinformation and disinformation** as the number one global risk, given the number of elections that will occur.

It is important to underline how much a more crowded, interdependent world is changing interstate relations. The split between an apparent self-centred West and the Global South gained substantive impetus when, at the height of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, European vaccine manufacturers blocked efforts to relax patent rights whilst simultaneously hoarding available vaccines for domestic use. In this changing world, Western countries underestimate how deeply intertwined their future is with the Global South regarding stability, growth, and environmental change. The divide was illustrated by the Global South's ambivalence in a forum such as the UN General Assembly on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the decision in September 2023 to expand the original group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) to include six additional countries with more to follow and the very different responses to events in Gaza when comparing that in the West with reactions from the Global South.

^[1] Daren Acemoglu & Simon Johnson, *Power and Progress: our thousand-year struggle over technology and prosperity*, Basic Books, London, 2023, p 336

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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