Global trends: disruptive, dangerous and disorderly

After a year of denial in 2017, global trends at the beginning of 2018—evident in the World Economic Forum's annual "The Global Risks Report 2018" and the deliberations at the high-level annual Munich Security Conference—reflect that the new year promises to be even more disruptive, dangerous and disorderly. This is clearly visible in three global trends related to peace and security.

First, there are growing intra-state conflicts, which range from urban violence to terrorism, the takeover of ungoverned spaces by extremist groups, secessionist movements, and civil wars. These have erupted on every continent and have mostly been conducted with small arms and light weapons, though some conflicts have also witnessed the use of chemical and biological weapons. In most of these conflicts, innocent civilians have become hapless targets.

Second, there are increasing inter-state conflicts and proxy wars, between regional actors as well as global powers, including some nuclear-armed states. Prominent among these are messy military entanglements in and around Syria involving Russia, the US, Iran, Israel and Turkey, with the potential for serious escalation. Similarly, Iran and Saudi Arabia are pitted against each other in Yemen, while China is challenging all the littoral powers in the South China Sea. These contestations are over territorial, ideological, and normative disputes, including varying interpretations of international norms and laws. Coupled with modernization programmes and doctrines that might allow for use of nuclear weapons, the nature of the emerging pattern of inter-state conflict is contributing to global and nuclear disorder. Indeed, the latest Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) released by the US has led many to worry that the long "nuclear peace" might give way to nuclear war.

Third, there is a slew of old and new transnational threats that no single nation can manage on its own. These range from pandemics (such as the recent Ebola and Zika outbreaks), natural disasters (tsunamis and earthquakes) and climate change, to global criminal networks, international extremist organizations, cyber attacks, and global proliferation networks. Indeed, the latest report of the UN on North Korea revealed that despite strict sanctions, Pyongyang was able to earn nearly $200 million through an elaborate proliferation network that ran through China, Europe, Russia, and Malaysia.

These formidable peace and security trends are exacerbated by several emerging characteristics that are contributing to global disorder.

First is the emergence of uber-national, populist leaders and governments who, while putting their own nations first, are challenging globalization broadly writ. This has led some of them to opt out of international agreements and treaties that they had signed up to. Moreover, many of these leaders and nations are either outrightly rejecting multilateralism (and plurilateralism) or are, at the very least, questioning international processes, norms and institutions.

Second is the emergence of a disorderly multipolar world. While the world is moving towards political, economic, technological and normative multipolarity, the ability to project power globally (and to ensure global security) still remains the domain of one, perhaps, two powers—the US and, increasingly, China. This means that while countries like India can shape the emerging rules of global governance, they do not have the ability to enforce them. Unless emerging powers can contribute to security, multipolarity will remain problematic.

Third, a similar multipolarity is apparent in decision-making of most domestic, regional and global rules. This is on account of the emergence of many stakeholders—beyond the traditional state—in

the decision-making process at the national, regional and global levels. These stakeholders, including civil society, private sector, rich foundations and individuals and cities, pose problems but also hold solutions to the global disorder.

Fourth, the rapid pace of technology evolution and diffusion, with the ability to empower individuals, small groups and even weak states, has the potential of creating asymmetrical competition. Coupled with the earlier characteristics of nationalism, multipolarity, and multi-stakeholders, there is almost an insurmountable gap between emerging technological capabilities and the ability to create norms and institutions to manage or govern them.

Finally, while propaganda was always a key disruptive instrument in previous global orders, the advent of 24x7 global social media coupled with fact-less news or "fake news", armies of trolls, and the ability to influence millions across borders instantaneously poses new threats. This is highlighted by the revelations of Russia's interference in the 2016 US elections.

These trends indicate that a more dangerous phase of global disorder has begun. History shows that in such scenarios, global order has been restored via two different pathways. The first is through visionary leadership on the part of statesmen willing to invest political and diplomatic capital to restore the order. This depends on the willingness of key leaders and nations to compromise and cooperate. The second path is one of confrontation, which seeks to enhance the power of one nation at the cost of others. This approach is not keen on compromise and often seeks a military solution. It is often the preferred option of weak populist leaders with strong armies. The global trends in 2018 reflect that the second pathway is more likely to be followed.

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