



Geopolitical instability

Although geopolitical instability has varied over time, climate change, competition for scarce resources, state fragility, and ideological conflicts all threaten to increase instability in the coming decades. This will have important implications for global trade, migration, governance and even population growth, as well as human wellbeing.

While research suggests a long-term decline in interstate warfare and deaths from violence since the 1950s [1], one in four people on the planet now live in fragile and conflict-affected states or territories [2]. The actors in these conflicts are not clearly defined, but include individual acts of violence and terrorism, terrorist groups, warlords, mercenaries, militias and cartels. This makes resolution almost impossible to reach. Added to this, battles are no longer fought in conventional warzones alone, or even in civic contexts, but also in cyberspace.

Recent and ongoing instances of instability include the crisis in western Sahel across multiple borders, gun violence in the United States, armed conflict and unrest in Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mexico's 'Drug war'. Worldwide displacement of people is at the highest level ever recorded, undermining the stability of nation states with large populations both leaving and arriving.

Countries such as Russia, Syria, Iran and Liberia have been destabilised to some extent by heavy trade sanctions, rebel insurgencies and infectious diseases in recent years. The Islamic State gained strength and strongholds in Iraq, where sectarian conflict persists following US withdrawal. Furthermore, fractured opposition, corrupt leadership and power struggles continue to jeopardise the possibility of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East and North Africa. Where profits from mineral and hydrocarbon extraction are concentrated in the hands of elites, such as Congo and Mozambique [3], this could potentially lead to violent conflict in future and disrupt global supply chains.

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Footnotes:

1. [Human Security Report Project \(2013\)](#).
2. [World Development Report, \(2011\)](#).
3. [Chatham House, \(2013\)](#).

Implications

- Over the next 35 years, population growth, reduced access to fresh water, [climate change](#) and declining arable land will place mounting pressure on global food and water security. The greatest pressure will be on those countries least equipped to deal with these challenges, increasing the risk of both inter- and intra-state conflict. [14]
- Cross-cutting, slow-burn, systemic challenges, such as climate change, widespread illicit trade, the management of the oceans (including a more accessible Arctic), Internet governance, international cooperation on space missions, and the enhancement of human rights, may prove more intractable when the prioritisation of domestic economic and social concerns undermines the ability of states to coordinate and implement policy remedies. [1]
- Women and children are often the worst affected by conflict, particularly through sexual violence and displacement. They are largely responsible for dealing with the aftermath of conflict: providing essential shelter, food and water for their families and rebuilding communities. [2]

- Organisations need to identify and monitor their level of exposure to an increase in geopolitical insecurity and manage any risks. Strategic discussions about long-term resilience should consider not just the manifestation of geopolitical instability, but also the causes of it such as inequality and environmental change.
- Global supply chains mean that natural, humanitarian and political disasters in any part of the world can influence the raw material extraction, production and transportation of products, and so have a significant global economic impact.

Footnotes:

1. [World Economic Forum \(2015, Jan\)](#).
2. [UNICEF](#)

Current trajectory

Between 2008 and 2015, the average Global Peace Index (GPI) country score deteriorated 2.4%, highlighting that on average the world has become slightly less peaceful. However, this decrease in peacefulness has not been evenly spread, with 86 countries deteriorating while 76 improved. MENA has suffered the largest decline of any region in the world, deteriorating 11% over the same period. Since 2008, the total economic impact of violence on the global economy has increased by 15.3%, from US\$12.4 trillion to US\$14.3 trillion, which constituted 13.4% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014. [1]

Footnotes:

1. [Institute of Economics and Peace \(2015, June\)](#).