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The Washington Post


Intelligence forecast sees a post-coronavirus world upended by climate change and splintering societies

Shane Harris 3 days ago




U.S. intelligence officials have little comfort to offer a pandemic-weary planet about where the world is heading in the next 20 years. Short answer: It looks pretty bleak.


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what's this?

On Thursday, the National Intelligence Council, a center in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that creates strategic forecasts and estimates, often based on material gathered by U.S. spy agencies, released its quadrennial “Global Trends” report.

Looking over the time horizon, it finds a world unsettled by the coronavirus pandemic, the ravages of climate change — which will propel mass migration — and a widening gap between what people demand from their leaders and what they can actually deliver.

The intelligence community has long warned policymakers and the public that pandemic disease could profoundly reshape global politics and U.S. national security. The authors of the report, which does not represent official U.S. policy, describe the pandemic as a preview of crises to come. It has been a globally destabilizing event — the council called it “the most significant, singular global disruption since World War II

— that “has reminded the world of its fragility” and “shaken long-held assumptions” about how well governments and institutions could respond to a catastrophe.

[Tracking the pandemic]

At the same time, the pandemic accelerated and exacerbated social and economic fissures that had already emerged. And it underscored the risks from “more and cascading global challenges, ranging from disease to climate change to the disruptions from new technologies and financial crises,” the authors write.

In language that will resonate with just about anyone who has tread water in the past year, the authors write of a “looming disequilibrium between existing and future challenges and the ability of institutions and systems to respond.”

Within societies, fragmentation is increasing — political, cultural, economic — and “large segments of the global population are becoming wary of institutions and governments that they see as unwilling or unable to address their needs,” the report says.

The effects of the pandemic will linger, and could shape future generations’ expectations of their governments, particularly as a warming world leads to new human conflicts, including, in the most dire scenario, global food shortages that spawn mass violence.

Global power was contested long before the pandemic, and those trends haven’t abated.

The report sees the international stage as largely being shaped by a rivalry between China and the United States, along with its allies. No single state is poised to become the dominant global force, the authors write. And competing powers will jockey for position, leading to “a more conflict-prone and volatile geopolitical environment.”

Technology, with all its potential to boost economies and enhance communication, also may aggravate political tension — as it already has.

People “are likely to gravitate to information silos of people who share similar views, reinforcing beliefs and understanding of the truth,” the

Prediction is an inherently risky business, and intelligence practitioners are quick to emphasize that they can't see the future. But the National Intelligence Council imagines five scenarios on a kind of sliding scale that may help tell us where the world is turning as we approach 2040.

On the rosier end, a "Renaissance of democracies" ushers in a new era of U.S. global leadership, in which economic growth and technological achievements offer solutions to the world's biggest problems and Russia and China are largely left in the dust, authoritarian vestiges whose brightest scientists and entrepreneurs have fled to the United States and Europe.

At the dark end of the future is "tragedy and mobilization," when the United States is no longer the dominant player, and a global environmental catastrophe prompts food shortages and a "bottom-up" revolution, with younger people, scarred by their leaders' failures during the coronavirus pandemic, embracing policies to repair the climate and tackle long-standing social inequality. In this scenario, a European Union dominated by green parties works with the United Nations to expand international aid and focus on sustainability, and China joins the effort in part to quell domestic unrest in its cities affected by famine.

In between those extremes, the report imagines three other possibilities: China becomes a leading state but not globally dominant; the United States and China prosper and compete as the two major powers; and globalization fails to create a single source of influence, and the world more or less devolves into competing blocs, preoccupied with threats to their prosperity and security.

[Major new climate study rules out less severe global warming scenarios]

The present has a lot of say over the future. And there, the authors find reason for alarm.

"The international system — including the organizations, alliances, rules, and norms — is poorly set up to address the compounding global challenges facing populations," the authors write.

But the pandemic may offer lessons on how not to repeat recent history. The authors note that although European countries restricted travel and exports of medical supplies early in the crisis, the European Union has now rallied around an economic rescue package. That "could bolster the European integration projecting going forward."

"Covid-19 could also lead to redirection of national budgets toward pandemic response and economic recovery," they add, "diverting funds from defense expenditures, foreign aid, and infrastructure programs in some countries, at least in the near term."

But overall, the pandemic leaves the authors with more questions than answers — and humbled.

"As researchers and analysts, we must be ever vigilant, asking better questions, frequently challenging our assumptions, checking our biases, and looking for weak signals of change," they write.

Their work is not all doomsaying. The forces shaping the world "are not fixed in perpetuity," the authors say. Countries that exploit technology and planning, particularly those that plan ahead for the seemingly inevitable consequences of climate change, will be poised to best manage the crisis. And countries that harness artificial intelligence could boost productivity and expand their economies in ways that let government deliver more services, reduce debt and help cover the costs of caring for aging populations.

Ultimately, the societies that succeed will be those that can adapt to change, but also forge social consensus around what should be done, the authors write. In a splintering world, that may be the hardest scenario to imagine.

