

A Destabilized, Dystopian World: A Future Foretold If We Don't Act

THE 27th Conference of the Parties to the climate convention that met last November struggled with unresolved tensions that have persisted since the first COP in 1995. Most major emitters have failed to deliver on reduction commitments, and richer nations have come up short in aiding poorer nations transition to a carbon-neutral economy. What we are seeing is a world where nation states and international institutions are unable to cope with a myriad of interconnected and accelerating environmental, economic, technological, and political changes.

A sobering guide to these stresses can be found in the global trends reports of the U.S. National Intelligence Council. The NIC was established in 1979 to facilitate collaboration of the intelligence community with policy experts and researchers inside and outside the government. Every four years since 1997 the NIC has published these reports.

The most recent, "Global Trends 2040," foresees a destabilized, "more contested world." Environmental, social, and economic costs of climate change will fall disproportionately on the world's poorer nations, creating new global "vulnerabilities and exacerbating existing risks to economic prosperity, food, water, health, and energy security." Environmental stresses combined with aging populations in developed and middle-income nations (e.g. China) will slow world economic growth—and exacerbate existing trends of economic inequality in most countries, fostering increased geopolitical competition. The power of international corporations will increase, but face political movements for regulation and protectionism.

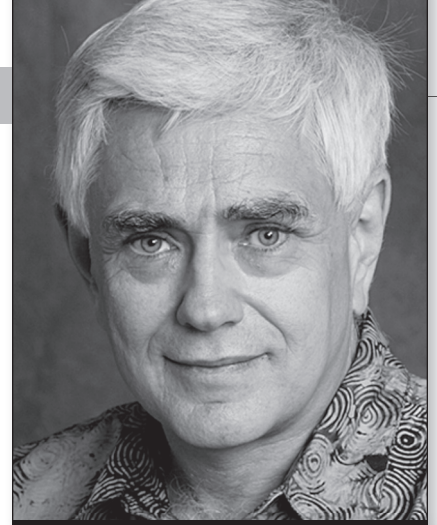
Within populations, pessimism and distrust will grow vis-a-vis the ability of

governments to cope with global challenges increasingly experienced at the local level. The trends report predicts many will seek refuge within ethnic, national, and religious identities, as well as in populist political movements that offer specious solutions. Advanced information technology and social media risk promoting an increasingly siloed information world that fuels these social trends, with growing threats to democracy. Rich countries may have less resources and political capital to deal with a world of failing states, as environmental disasters stress their domestic financial and institutional resources.

According to the report, emerging energy technologies with falling costs can speed up the transition to a climate friendly economy. Examples include solar photovoltaic and wind energy; advanced energy storage systems; and small-scale modular nuclear reactors. But the successful deployment of these technologies is very much a function of the political economy of nations and the international system.

Technology will not save us, unless we save ourselves by reforming political and economic systems mismatched to deal with global challenges. As national and international institutions and multilateral agreements are "overwhelmed or sidelined" by the challenges, the trends report warns, nations, or even individual corporations and billionaires, may take reckless unilateral actions, with unforeseen consequences. Geoengineering, for example, could entail unintended catastrophic side effects on global weather patterns.

"Global Trends 2040" concludes with five scenarios offering different outcomes depending on the evolution of political and economic factors. The optimistic "Renaissance of Democracies" scenario envisages a renewal of the



Bruce Rich is an attorney and author who has served as senior counsel to major environmental organizations. brucemrich@gmail.com.

rules-based, western-led international order, both within nations and internationally, spurred by rising economic growth and technological advances. Global challenges will be met, as wealth and technology is shared more equitably with poorer nations. In "A World Adrift," current trends continue, the international political system and global economy atrophy, and the world spirals into greater turbulence as climate change pushes humanity closer to the edge. In "Competitive Coexistence," the United States, China and other states cooperate in setting rules for peaceful competition, but "long term climate challenges remain." "Separate Silos" portrays an Orwellian future where the international order disintegrates into economic and military-security blocs, trade is reduced, more poor countries become failed states, climate change is unchecked, and global problems multiply. Finally, "Tragedy and Mobilization" envisages a future of worldwide environmental catastrophes, causing global food shortages, and mass famine. Violent calls for political change create the political will for the European Union, China, and the United States to effectively act together.

Only one of these scenarios is hopeful for avoiding climate catastrophe and mitigating social and geopolitical risk. Effective action in that direction depends on a growth of trust that governments can address, and together will address equitably, these synergistically interconnected environmental, economic, and social challenges.

The intelligence community offers five future scenarios. Only one is hopeful