

The Future Is Now: A New Urgency for Global Action

Opinion Piece

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The China-West Dialogue (CWD) is an inclusive project which draws together thought-leaders from China, Canada, Chile, Europe, the UK, Japan, Korea, and the United States. The CWD seeks to define an “alternative framework” for China-West relations at a moment when the toxic US-China bilateral relationship dominates geopolitics. Global governance issues in particular have been significantly hampered by these rising bilateral tensions.

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THE NEW URGENCY

On 21 March, the International Panel on Climate Change issued its most dire report, stating that global temperatures are now likely to rise above the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold in “the first half of the 2030s.” This brings forward the 1.5-degree target by nearly twenty years.

To avoid this disastrous trend, the IPCC report states that two steps would be necessary: industrialized nations would have to reduce CO₂ emissions by half by 2030, and “stop adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere altogether by the early 2050s” (Plumer, 2023). In other words, the current target of achieving net-zero CO₂ emissions by 2050 will no longer be enough; ZERO emissions have to be achieved by “the early 2050s,” because carbon off-sets will then be necessary to hold temperature rises closer to 1.5 degrees.

These new projections basically imply a categorical shift not only in the timeframe within which action needs to be taken to avoid highly catastrophic impacts from climate change, but also in the scale of action needed.

As the New York Times reported, “To stave off a chaotic future ... government and companies would need to invest three to six times the roughly \$600 billion they now spend annually on encouraging clean energy in order to hold global warming at 1.5 to 2 degrees, the report says” (Plumer, 2023).

To scale-up to this level of investment to avoid catastrophes would require a massive effort that needs to be undertaken now, not later. The urgency is clear. The future is now. Action must begin, now.

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THE NEW CONTEXT

As super-charged as the new climate change trajectories are, global warming is not the only drama on the world stage.

All countries are facing the turbulence caused by middle class anger with the sense of exclusion, disappointed expectations, and being left out of the benefits of global growth. This widespread anger has revealed a loss in confidence in institutions, markets and governance to deliver for ordinary people. This disenchantment with socio-economic-governance outcomes has fueled polarization in domestic politics and nationalism in international relations. The international spillover effects of internal social and political divides create an extremely unfortunate conjunction of forces that generate geopolitical tensions which dampen the international cooperation and coordination needed to address the systemic global challenges facing the world as a whole. The last layer of constraint is the Russian war in Ukraine, which has stimulated global inflation and external debt pressures and drained fiscal resources in all countries

which could otherwise be available to address systemic issues.

Just at the moment when it is abundantly clear to the most casual observer that all these systemic risks are interconnected, it becomes increasingly clear how constrained the world is in dealing with them. We have known for some time that we have to energize recoupling, alignment and sustainability together. Now, there needs to be an acceleration of these efforts.

The short-term pressures are consuming available resources, even before discounting into the present the imperative investments necessary to deal with not only climate change, but also social inclusion, global health, public education, digitalization and AI, and strengthening

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domestic and global governance. Even though the evidence is now clear that as a global community we must come together and mobilize resources and clarify public purpose as imperatives for systemic sustainability, the constraints are daunting.

ARE THERE WAYS FORWARD?

Are there ways to articulate the human predicament which instill in publics a sense of the stake each person has in the global outcomes for the future, a sense of social responsibility within their communities, workplaces, families and nations, and a sense of urgency and understanding? These could enable convergent public discourses and debates that might generate the actions that are necessary to strengthen economic prospects and social outcomes for all, institutional mechanisms that work for the benefit of societies as a whole, and environmental sustainability across sectors and around the world. Can the current moment lift peoples' horizons beyond the parameters of self-interest and individual benefit, to an understanding that the fate of everyone impacts the conditions of all?

CIVIL SOCIETY FORUMS AS MODES OF GOVERNANCE IN TIMES OF CRISES

The Global Solutions Summit grew out of the Think20 (T20) of the German G20 in 2017 when Dennis Snower created it as a broader, more inclusive forum that would meet annually in Berlin rather than rotate among capitals of G20 host countries, as is the case with the T20. The Global Solutions Summit (GSS) is not just composed of think tank experts, academics and researchers but includes thought leaders in business, labor, religions, science, policy-

making, politics, reaching out to women and youth. It is a veritable reflection of civil society in most countries. The GSS has as its focus the global context and systemic challenges of our time. It is not biased toward one profession or another, or one region over others, or one political tendency over another.

The focus of the GSS does make it a platform for concerned global citizens who are seized by the conjunctural moment we are in to interrogate, explore, question, elaborate and articulate ways in which humanity, nations, cities and individuals can exercise agency over problems in the public square, envision pathways forward and imagine ways of taking responsibility for global outcomes rather than relying on markets or current leaders or existing institutions to determine the global future.

The overall purpose of this global platform is to interact with each other in ways that enable seeking, finding, and formulating pathways forward to better futures than would be the case if we had not stepped up and joined together to take charge of the global future rather than be subject to how it might evolve, unguided by the human mind and imagination.

The need to step up and steer the future rather than be a victim of it is amply demonstrated by an observation in the New York Times regarding the annual Economic Report of the President of the United States by the White House Council of Economic Advisers. "The report broadly suggests that climate change has upended the concept of risk in all corners of the American economy, distorting markets in ways that companies, people and policy-makers have not fully kept up with. It also suggests that the federal government will

be left with significantly higher costs in the future if it does not better identify those risks and correct those market distortions" (Tankersley & Flavell, 2023). "Correcting market distortions" has not been a central concern of mainstream economics. This observation highlights the intensity of the current context.

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The opinion writer, Thomas L. Friedman, has written a startling article explaining the enormous impact anticipated from AI in general and the GPT-4 that will cause "everything, everywhere (to) change all at once" (Friedman, 2023). He shows a way forward for all of us in Berlin in mid-May of 2023 and beyond: "We are going to need to develop ... 'complex adaptive coalitions' ... where business, government, social entrepreneurs, educators, competing super-powers and moral philosophers all come together to define how we get the best and cushion the works of A.I. No one

player in this coalition can fix the problem alone. It requires a different governing model from traditional left-right politics. And we will have to transition to it amid the worst great-power tensions since the end of the Cold War and culture wars breaking out inside virtually every democracy.”

The Global Solutions Summit is itself a “different governing model.” We have a clear set of challenges in front of us. There is now a new urgency to force actions and solutions. The Global Solutions Summit is not a decision-making forum. No one elected any of us to decide anything. But it is a caldron for generating fresh ideas, new approaches, complex perspectives, and practical solutions that can contribute to shifting public discourses and political dynamics to facilitate crucial steps forward toward deliberately designed futures rather than default outcomes resulting from failures to take responsibility for human destiny.

The opinions expressed in this article correspond to its author and are his sole responsibility.

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