

The Wheels Are Coming Off - Dimitrios Triantaphyllou



Increasingly I feel like I am living in the twilight zone or in a world of parallel reality where simultaneously Time Magazine's [Person of the Year](#) is Taylor Swift while in the immediate vicinity of the neighborhood I live in, there are four serious armed conflicts taking place: The deadly stalemate in Ukraine following Russian's invasion in February 2022; the Israel-Hamas War since early October with both its mounting moral dilemmas and deaths; the 13 years long Syrian Civil war with its over 500,000 casualties; and the Libyan conflict which since 2011 has manifested itself into civil wars and an ongoing unstable provider of regional insecurity. All these conflicts are not self-contained but instead increasingly

intertwined as they raise tremendous challenges and conundrums for those directly involved as well as for the international community that finds itself increasingly at odds with itself.

In this world of private armies and an increasing number of [proxy wars and conflicts](#), the prevalence of instability is an increasing reality. Some of these conflicts, such as the civil war in Yemen, the Sahel conflict or the conflict in Ethiopia, are not necessarily distant from my immediate Eastern Mediterranean neighborhood. The stress on resources due to the increasing demands for humanitarian assistance, development assistance, or even military assistance (in particular with regard to Ukraine) coupled with the cost of reconstruction projections of these conflicts compound the efforts invested in regulating them.

The increasing fragmentation of the world is marked as a growing number of divides that have widened to the point of irreconcilable differences both within societies and between countries. The use of violence as a weapon to induce change seems to have acquired legitimacy while the world is increasingly defined as a tug of war between the West and anti-western resentment across the globe.

This is particularly evident in the wider Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions where two divides have crystallized. The first is an East-West divide which has geopolitical overtones with the growing policy as well as ideological or value-based divisions between the West with countries like Russia, Iran, and Turkey. In this context, infowars with their spewing of malevolent misinformation and their hybrid war nature increasingly dominate the public sphere. The other divide is a North-South one with societal undertones where the issues of wealth distribution and its inequities, shifting demographics, faith-based differences, especially between Islam and Christianity (and Judaism), evermore prevail. There is a growing use of the terminology of de-colonization, anti-colonization or neocolonialism reminiscent of the wars of liberation of the post War period. Even Russia's March 2023 [Foreign Policy Concept](#) is replete with these terms in a marked attempt to encourage their use and adoption by countries, entities, or peoples across the globe or by groups within western societies.

The war between Israel and Hamas combines the two aforementioned dynamics with this junction representing a nightmarish scenario for the Europeans. The gradual transformation of an essentially secular conflict between Palestinians and Jews into one with both religious and messianic characteristics and attempts to define and justify “just wars” on all sides are setting the stage for a wider culture war or a clash of civilizations to use Samuel Huntington’s words. The danger is the petrification of Europe and, in particular, the European Union and its member states, that appears both fragile and shellshocked to react to the accruing challenges. Recently Nathalie Tocci, an astute observer of European affairs, correctly identified the stakes for Europe when she wrote about “[the rise and fall of geopolitical Europe](#)” where while: “Europe’s approach to Ukraine held the promise of showing what a geopolitical Europe could mean. The Middle East now reveals its demise.”

The result is the perseverance of fragile societies whose resilience is under constant attack while they seem to lack both the political and intellectual acumen to understand the state of the world and its dynamics, and the ability to address the challenges. Consequently, Europe is increasingly less involved in the Middle East conflicts as it is unable to produce a united front.

Apart from the immediate vicinity, the complications of regional and global governance are growing. The tense and protracted negotiations at the [COP-28 Climate Summit](#) in Dubai, during the warmest year on record leading to a last-moment consensus on the need to transition away from fossil fuels for the first time might be welcome. Yet the lack of how to both fund this transition over time fairly leaves much to be desired, albeit the 85 Billion dollars committed to date. Given the consensus among experts that the four most important drivers implying a correlation between climate change and armed conflict include low socioeconomic development, low capabilities of the state, intergroup inequality (such as ethnic differences across groups) and recent history of violent conflict, the MENA region is particularly vulnerable.

Similarly, the explosion of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) revolution in 2023 and the lack of a consensual framework to regulate it and how it will shape the world

is another formidable global challenge. The early December [deal](#) struck between the European Council and the European Parliament on the Artificial Intelligence Act, the world's first of its kind, clearly highlights the multiple challenges brought about by Artificial Intelligence. While AI can offer groundbreaking solutions in redefining cybersecurity strategies by contributing to enhanced threat detection and predictive analytics, it can also serve as a double-edged sword by multiplying the potential of AI-driven cyber threats with the proliferation of sophisticated malware and automated attacks, as well as enter the realm of social engineering via deepfake AI-generated attacks and manipulative tactics.

On a wider strategic context, the state of play between the United States and Russia, the world's key nuclear powers, is troubling. Apart from the publication in March of Russia's new Foreign Policy Concept which clearly marks the growing divide with the United States and the West, the decision by the Russian Federation to revoke its ratification of the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and to withdraw from the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe (CFE) leaves much to be desired.

On the other hand, 2023 was marked both by the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne and the 75th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reminding us of the stability provided both by the binding nature of the international legal order as well as by its value-based norms. Also, this year was shaped by the celebration of the first centenary of the Turkish Republic as well as the 50th anniversary of the student uprising at the National Technical University of Athens which eventually led to the unravelling of the country's military junta in 1974 demonstrating both the resilience of a nation's state-building process and the universal thirst for democracy.

Nevertheless, these events have all been overshadowed by the unstable regional and international environment, by the rise of antisemitism and the politics of division, by the fear of an upsurge of the revanchist far right in Europe and the disruptive politics of Donald Trump in the United States, and the restless masses both in Europe and in the Muslim world where people are ever more prone to

populist machinations and manipulation. [Robert Kagan](#)'s recent opinion article in *The Washington Post* regarding the very real possibility of a Trump dictatorship in the United States should he win next year's presidential election is a clear omen that the world is becoming more and more unhinged.

As both the wars in Ukraine and Gaza are expected to end later rather than anytime soon, the longevity of both and other conflicts suggest that the multiple crises the world is facing are expected to last for a long time, thus further eroding the legitimacy of states and their representatives. The widening chasm in worldviews between major actors internationally and within societies could possibly become unbridgeable, potentially presaging further uncertainty, if not a wider confrontation. This situation deters us from focusing on finding solutions for a "beyond resilience" context where the effort is not only on ensuring the resilience of our societies but also on positing about and planning for viable and sustainable societies and a world seeking connectivity amidst healthy competition.

Until we rediscover our moral, ethical, and analytical compasses, we will continue to be slow walking towards our unravelling sidetracked by the latest celebrity gossip regarding Taylor Swift's latest love interest or whether Barbie is a better movie than *Oppenheimer*, in order to avoid focusing or thinking about the horrors of our reality.

We should instead remember Robert J. [Oppenheimer](#)'s dire words uttered sometime after the Trinity Test in July 1945 confirmed that the Atom bomb was here to stay: "We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed; a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*; Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that, one way or another."



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