

# **On the Results of the Project on the Future of Peace and War**

**Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipation Summit**

**Speech by  
Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Director, GCSP**

Geneva, 11 October 2023

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

The GCSP is excited to be part of this project and I am delighted to be up here with an exceptional panel and a distinguished audience. Jean-Marie spoke of what was developed in the first two workshops of our joint project on the Future of Peace and War. I want to elaborate on three considerations, three considerations on the meta level, that I took away from the workshops:

**First**, current global trends suggest that there is much to fear. However, if we look at the history of predictions much of what was feared in the past about the then future did not occur. Fear, as the saying goes, is a poor advisor. Furthermore, we probably think that the world is worse off because we can see – by a quick glance at our smart phones – everything that is going on around the world.

That said, there seem to be a cascading number of threats and challenges that are interlinked: what has been described as a “polycrisis”. The unprecedented rapidity of technological change, its transformative effects and its existential implications have never been so extreme. At the same time our ability to understand and hence guide technology has never lagged so far behind. This gap creates uncertainty, even fear.

“*Move fast and break things*” the quote attributed to Mark Zuckerberg in around 2004 remained Facebook’s internal motto until 2014. It was broadly seen as the dominant ethos in the digital tech industry.

By 2018 Mark Zuckerberg was advocating for greater government regulation. By 2023 many tech leaders – including Elon Musk and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak – signed an open letter calling for a six-month moratorium on the development of advanced AI technologies while risks were being assessed.

Within five years the sentiment in a significant part of the tech industry shifted from “*move forward and break things*”, to “*move forward with greater caution. Pause where necessary.*”

As with new technologies, the many new unknowns in geopolitics can give rise to fear. Many of the trends are indeed threatening. Let me list some:

- The deficit in the requisite geo-political will between superpowers – also the two greatest carbon emitters – to take action commensurate with what would be required to contain global warming to less catastrophic levels.
- The return of inter-state war.
- The resurgence of the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons.
- Conflict related deaths reaching a 28 year high after breaking a 20-year decline.

These fearful trends create fear driven responses: For eight consecutive years defense spending globally has increased with a record-breaking increase last year in Europe of 13 per cent.

Unlike with regard to new tech threats, in geopolitics the countertrends are not yet so visible, but there are other trends – so called weak signals – which

perhaps deserve more attention and certainly more encouragement. Jean-Marie alluded to a few, but I would like to underline them. Here is a partial list:

- **Global youth movements.** These have dramatically changed global awareness and action on climate change and gender discrimination. On a national level, in countries as diverse as Chile and Iran they have triggered major changes in national policy with regard to long established injustices.
- **The use of social media as a tool for direct democracy.** Social media is an effective tool for surveillance, manipulation, and the undermining of the integrity of electoral processes, but that is not the whole story. Technology also facilitates direct, grass roots activism.

Social media is being used to enhance non-electoral democratic accountability. With smart phones every human being becomes a potential journalist, a documentalist, a witness, a whistleblower, or a reporter.

Social media has proven an expeditious tool to bring human rights abuses and corruption to public attention, to have real time information on unfolding events and thus be in a better position to influence them. For example, as climate change intensifies and there are more extreme weather events, many lives have been saved through AI enhanced forecasting and digital tools for information dissemination.

- Furthermore, **digital technologies allow peace processes to be far more inclusive.** Digital technologies can be used to gather opinions from all stakeholders to a process. This enhances the durability of peacemaking and peace building processes.

Other weak signal trends which I believe deserves mention:

- We hear frequently of the demise of multilateralism due to global schisms. There are indeed many signs of its diminished effectiveness. But over the past five years, there have been some significant normative achievements under UN auspices. Think of the global compact on migration; a treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons; and a treaty on the high seas. Despite divisions within the UN, the Security Council has recently agreed on deploying a multinational security mission to Haiti. So joint action is still possible.
- We hear frequently that the international order, the rules-based order, and international law are broken. A GCSP working paper written by my colleague, Tobias Vestner, assesses the divide between war and peace as treated by international law. The GCSP paper indeed finds that international law struggles to guide appropriate state behavior. Yet, we also found that states remain committed and uphold the existing legal norms, notably of the UN Charter.

These are not insignificant achievements. Therefore, the question we have to ask is not only how global discord paralyzes multilateralism but also how to build on islands of cooperation.

I think one of the virtues of our project is the focus on the future of peace. There are plenty of projects focused on the future of war – from a variety of perspectives. But very few people focus on the future of peace – and how to achieve it. Indeed, I see a lot of war-gaming as if this were some sort of harmless spectator’s sport. But who is “peace gaming”?

Yes, bad things do happen, and bad things will happen. There seems to be a growing trend to resolve issues by force. But many of the things that occur are unexpected.

**This brings me to my second point:** We need to think about the future with a degree of humility. We cannot predict it. But we can try to anticipate possible scenarios. Therefore, be more humble and in that spirit, as Jean Marie stressed, we need to think in terms of multiple, contrasting futures: Why humility? As indicated, what we usually think will happen often won't happen.

The historian Lawrence Freedman in his book "the Future of War" meticulously demonstrated how almost all past predictions on war and warfare did not come to be. Likewise, if we think of some of the major predictions that were made in our lifetimes many have proven erroneous:

With the end of the Cold War and a surge in globalization there were many predictions that the era that began with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia was over and that transnational and local politics would lead to a steady decline of the nation state.

But deglobalization, the rise of nationalism, reactions to COVID and migration, and the rise of populism have shown that neither the nation nor the state have lost their appeal.

Take another example. In 1949 George Orwell wrote his novel "1984" predicting a form of technology which could both maximize the ability to convey propaganda while also being an instrument of surveillance. That happened not through the large, ubiquitous screens Orwell foresaw but through more individualized and hence more pernicious content on the screens of our smart phones, tablets and laptops.

However, other predictions from the 1950s about anticipated technological breakthroughs have not yet materialized, at least not outside the laboratory: Flying cars and jetpacks, eating all our meals in the form of a pill, human colonies on the moon.

Indeed, the most major transformative new technology since the invention of the printing press or the steam engine was not anticipated: The invention of digital technologies and their all-pervasive application on every aspect of public and private life.

What I am saying is that much of what we think will happen – including in the field of technology – will not happen and many things we do not anticipate, will happen. If we do not factor this concept of known and unknown unknowns as well as Black Swan events into our anticipation models, we will create a false sense of security.

We also need to regularly go back and revise what we have anticipated based on new evidence. If that methodology is common in the hard sciences, it is perhaps pursued with less rigour in the social sciences.

**Which brings me to my third and final point:** The paradox of our time is that we have better tools than ever to predict and anticipate the future, while that future has also become less predictable than ever. We can model economic and demographic trends and the impact of climate change with extreme precision. We have more and better informed social and political scientists than at any other point in human history. And yet still, we know little of what will really happen. Ours is an age of systemic uncertainty.

This realization was brought home to me after reading the press coverage of the recent Jackson Hole retreat of central bankers. These are probably some of the best-informed people on our planet. And yet with access to the best predictive and anticipatory modelling in the world this is what they said:

Christine Lagarde spoke of an era of “*shifts and breaks*” in which “*past regularities may no longer be a good guide.*” Jerome Powell, said “*we are navigating by the stars under cloudy skies.*” In short things have changed but we do not really understand how.

One could conclude from all I have said that we should throw up our arms and seek a safe haven somewhere since the only thing that we can predict is that the future will be uncertain. That is one response, but it overlooks an important point that Jean-Marie made We have agency. The future can be changed – by design.

Indeed, despite the problems of the present, I think there is a political opportunity to focus on the future. The Summit of the Future will focus the attention of leaders on enhancing our ability to prepare for possible eventualities and reduce risks collectively that affect us all as a species. We should discuss how our work can have an input into the process of preparing that Summit.

Colleagues, if we are facing what historian Adam Tooze calls a “polycrisis”, we need a polymath approach to understand and deal with it. That is why I think combining GCSP’s understanding of geopolitics and global trends, Colombia’s knowledge of the international system with the Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator is a great way of looking over the horizon and mapping out possible futures for peace, not just war. Together we are better equipped and positioned to carry out strategic anticipation, and work towards peace.

Thank you.