Foreword

At a time of unprecedented and enveloping crisis, and with millions dying of the Chinese virus, across the world, conventional and enduring security threats appear to have receded somewhat from public attention. The abrupt outburst of the Israel-Palestine conflict in May 2021, however, made it abundantly clear that, despite the devastation wrought by the global pandemic, enduring conflicts are far from resolution, or even deferral. China's sustained and sinister consolidation of territorial dominance along its land and sea borders, indeed, takes advantage of the distraction that currently afflicts the international community, to push a creeping occupation into neighbouring countries. The violence in Afghanistan, in the wake of America's progressive drawdown and imminent withdrawal, reminds us – as do periodic reports of terrorist attacks in other parts of the world – that terrorism is far from a thing of the past, and may well see a significant resurgence in the wake of another dramatic 'victory of Islam' against a global superpower – echoes of what occurred in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

Indeed, on many other parameters as well, the pandemic has significantly increased existing risks to security. As the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* notes,

> The pandemic has created fertile ground for crime to flourish. The economic downturn and associated lockdowns are also exacerbating the vulnerabilities of the most disadvantaged groups. Organized crime groups are stepping in where States are unable to provide support to

those most at risk of being left behind and using this to expand their reach.

In Myanmar, the military coup and the quick dismissal of the elected government, demonstrated that the authoritarian agenda continues to flourish, and that an arduous peace process that appeared to be approaching fruition, has easily been sacrificed by the military *junta* there, provoking a return to violence by many groups that were party to a ceasefire agreement. But Myanmar is far from alone in its trajectory towards authoritarianism – extremist ideologies and governmental abuse and suppression of freedoms is no longer restricted to rogue and openly totalitarian regimes. Increasingly unsubtle tyrannies are emerging in purportedly democratic states across the world.

Escalating domestic violence, in particular violence against women, has been another widely noticed feature of the pandemic, even as the lockdowns, the unemployment, the collapse of businesses, the dislocation, and the distress and mental illness that have resulted, create an environment fraught with tension, frustration and rage.

There is also a significant loss of confidence in governments across the world, as administrations failed to cope with the magnitude of the challenges created by the pandemic, even as partisan political rivalries – rather than national or human interest – tended to dominate responses in many countries. Equally, faith in international institutions, has been sharply eroded, particularly in view of the dubious statements and questionable conduct of the World Health Organisation leadership in the initial stages and in the inquiries into the origins of the Chinese virus.

The progressive collapse of the Western hegemony – led by the USA, for a brief moment in history, the 'sole superpower' – has opened up the world to vicious and potentially catastrophic new 'great games.' While China and Russia appear to have joined together as partners of opportunity, to exploit the growing vacuums in global power, many lesser players are also jockeying

for a place at the high table – and are each of these is willing to use all means available to fulfil their reckless ambitions.

All present indices suggest that the world is moving into a time of greater troubles, and these will naturally and enormously be augmented by the inexorable devastation human demography and consumption is inflicting on the planet.

A tremendous effort of will and intellect will be needed to contain and reverse these toxic trends. Absent a global and coordinated effort and the evolution of a paradigm that goes beyond traditional competition, violent contestation and obsessive hyper-consumption, the human species is now confronted with a foreseeable threat of catastrophe, if not extinction. Understanding, managing and resolving present conflicts is an integral element of this struggle for human survival.

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