

Global Megacrisis and Response: A Perspective from India

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The four scenarios on the pessimist-optimist axis presented by William Halal and Michael Marien are helpful constructs to envision the future of global reality in the medium term. The contrasting assessments of Halal and Marien give us a good sense of the wide range of opinion on how the world will look like in the next few decades. My position is much closer to Marien's "Four I" scenario (Infoglut, Ignorance, Indecision, and Inadequacy), as I believe that we have enough knowledge and tools available, but we do not have the political-social leadership and collective capacity to act adequately and quickly enough. Bigger than the huge budgetary deficits in the developed economies is the "wisdom deficit" we face globally.

While the ICTs engage, entertain as well as distract us to no end, what we really lack is the wisdom to channel these for collective good. I cannot agree more with the anonymous comment quoted in the paper, 'Humanity is long on skill (IT/AI) but short on wisdom (ability to govern and decide wisely).'

Likelihood of the Four Scenarios

My assessment of the four scenarios is as follows:

Scenario	Year	Probability	Comments
Decline to Disaster	2030	2 %	Unlikely, but not completely ruled out
Muddling Down	2025	55%	Most likely scenario. Some components already there; could play out fully by 2025
Muddling Up	2030	42%	Quite likely. Muddling down could also evolve or transform into muddling up
Rise to Maturity	2050	1%	Very unlikely in the next few decades but could possibly follow the other three scenarios

Decline to disaster is the worst case scenario if things keep moving in a downward spiral in the next two decades, with continued failures of global governance and cooperation, triggered by cataclysmic events such as nuclear war or unforeseen events like massive volcanic eruptions.

Muddling down, however, is the more likely outcome. Muddling up, the next most likely scenario, will happen if a number of global actors, especially the more developed, privileged and powerful countries and individuals play a responsible role and are willing to let go of some of their wealth and privileges for the larger good of the planet. In other words, a "win-lose" game will be necessary before the emergence of a "win-win" situation for the whole global population.

Rise to maturity would be a miraculous social evolutionary leap, if it happens. Although highly unlikely in the next few decades, it may happen after a series of cataclysmic global disasters - "breakthrough" after "breakdown".

The views of various experts on different aspects of the megacrisis and the trends noted by Halal and Marien are quite agreeable. But it matters where you are looking at the global megacrisis from. The South is much less shaken up by the current global crisis than the North. Having lived under colonial subjugation for over two centuries and in poverty for decades, the tide is now turning for India and many other "emerging economies". The future appears bright and hopeful from the perspective of India. More than half its population is below the age of 24, and is mostly quite confident and optimistic about the future. The same applies in varying degrees to countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Africa, while China is already flexing its muscle as a global superpower (Kapoor, 2011).

Resolving the Megacrisis

Three strategies, missing at present, will be essential for resolving the megacrisis.

One, as mentioned above in discussing the muddling up scenario, the rich and powerful global actors will have to be prepared to "lose" before a "win-win" scenario can happen. As the Singaporean diplomat-scholar Kishore Mahbubani writes, 'Few in the West have grasped the full implications of the two most salient features of our historical epoch. First, we have reached the end of the era of Western domination of world history (but not the end of the West, which will remain the single strongest civilization for decades more). Second, we will see an enormous renaissance of Asian societies. The strategic discourse in the West should focus on how the West should adapt, but this has not happened.' (Mahbubani, 2008)

The young scholar Parag Khanna suggests that we need a new, "mega-diplomacy" to overcome the looming threat of a new Middle Ages and chart the course to the next renaissance. Mega-diplomacy is the art of creating coalitions among multiple stakeholders in a post-modern world of dispersed power, influence and leadership. 'If a new global social contract is to emerge, it will be as a result of the communities of the world - whether nations, corporations, or faiths - sharing knowledge and cooperating, but also learning to respect one another's power and values.' (Khanna, 2011, p.213)

Two, we need not merely dialogue between the West, Islam and other human civilizations, we need an "embrace of civilizations" to learn to live with mutual respect and brotherhood.

Ervin Laszlo, the founder of the Club of Budapest, expresses this beautifully. 'Extensive' evolution in human history - characterised by conquest, colonisation and consumption - '...is inappropriate and unsustainable for the third millennium. Standing at a critical juncture in the history of our species, what we need today is 'intensive' evolution, characterised by connection, communication and consciousness.' (Laszlo, 2001)

Three, Marien's assertion that '...our so called "knowledge society" is poorly organized for public learning about complex problems' is most pertinent. We need a public education programme for scientific and complex systems knowledge to flow from the citadels of expertise and reach much, much more widely to the 'man in the street.' Without this 'democratization' and dissemination of knowledge all the wisdom of the learned will not help us to save the world.

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