
Five Opportunities in a Turbulent World

JAMES STAVRIDIS

It is frighteningly easy to make a list of today's global challenges: pandemics like Ebola; the rise of the Islamic State and the ongoing war between Sunni and Shi'a factions within Islam, with its huge spillover effects in the Middle East; deep, unresolved tension in east Asia, notably between China and Japan and nuclear-armed North Korea; the looming threat of state-sponsored and criminal cyber attack; and Russian intransigence in Ukraine and along its borders. A growing recognition of global inequality, easily viewable through social media, has also led to ongoing unrest. The potential for a nuclear-armed Iran, a tottering economy in Europe, a half-dozen virulent insurgencies around the world, border disputes, arms and narcotics trade, water shortages, and many other vexing issues will continue to challenge U.S. policymakers.

However, there is real value in occasionally reflecting on what is going well in our world. So often, we move rapidly past our successes. Henry Kissinger famously said "every solution is merely an admission ticket to the next problem." But by examining our wins, we can learn a few lessons and ensure that we do not perpetuate a zeitgeist of gloom and despair. Here are some hopeful examples of progress that may translate into opportunities in this turbulent and dangerous world:

ADVANCES IN BIOLOGY

We are on the cusp of great advances in the world of biology. For two decades, we have been taking great strides in the areas of technology,

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communications, and data management, but the next big wave of innovation will be in the realm of biology. The ability to sequence the human genome at relatively little cost will permit dramatic advances in human life

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You Think, the potential for truly revolutionary changes to human society lies ahead in the world of biology. Biological innovations set the stage for greatly improving human well being, while providing solutions to threats to our environment and natural resources.

extension, 3D bio printing, tailor-made designer drugs, and human performance enhancements. Energy from biomass, and synthetic crops and livestock also show real promise. And the merger of nano-technology with the world of biology will drive huge improvements. As Peter Diamandis illustrates in *Abundance: The Future is Better Than*

SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION AND PEACE IN THE BALKANS

The decade of Balkan wars in the late 1990s looked much like the conflict in the Middle East today—intractable conflicts, genocide, and pervasive religious and ethnic violence amid predictions by leading statesmen of a century of warfare. Then, over a few days in Bosnia, 8,000 men and boys of Muslim descent were massacred at Srebrenica. It was a world afire. Today Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, and Croatia are members of NATO and are either already EU members or on the path toward joining. Montenegro and Macedonia are not far behind. There are still political tensions in the region—notably over Kosovo and in Bosnia-Herzegovina—but these countries, instead of reaching for rifles to solve a problem, now pick up a phone and call Brussels to thwart broader crises. The primary lessons from the Balkans conflict are that international intervention can be effective and lifesaving, and that even individuals divided by deep-seated suspicion and hatred can come together to negotiate peace.

EDUCATION MOVING ONLINE

For thousands of years, education has been conducted in the way of Socrates—in person, in a classroom, with students in a circle listening to a learned professor declaim. This method is effective, but also inefficient. As the Internet continues to dominate global information—there

are some 4 billion users out of a global population of 7 billion—and more devices are attached to the World Wide Web, the ability to deliver information, knowledge, and ultimately education will go viral. As more and more people are able to access knowledge and connect to the rest of the world, quality of life will gradually improve for millions.

There is also a dark side to this trend: Islamic extremists and other dangerous actors can use the same techniques to disrupt and destroy livelihoods. Still, in the long game of security and prosperity, education is the answer. In this marketplace, our ideas are fundamentally good ones: democracy, liberty, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, gender, and racial equality. These ideas will win in the end, and the ability to transmit them at higher rates to broader audiences represents a huge opportunity for oppressed and disenfranchised populations across the globe.

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MULTIFACETED ENGAGEMENT AND COLOMBIA'S EMERGENCE FROM FIFTY YEARS OF WAR

Led by President Juan Manuel Santos, an alumnus of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Colombia is closer than it has ever been to a sweeping peace accord, and this beautiful and resource-rich nation of 40 million could be the next powerhouse economy in Latin America. If Colombia can reach an agreement to fully demobilize the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, then the international, interagency, private-public, and strategic communication approach used in Colombia will have successfully solved one of the longest running conflicts in modern history. Colombia, even ten years ago, was held back by record levels of murders, rapes, kidnappings, tortures, and all other revulsions of a brutal guerrilla war. Today, Colombia is an increasingly more peaceful tourist destination and a hallmark of civic innovation.

ENERGY IMPROVEMENTS

Predictions from fifty years ago indicate that we should be approaching an energy crisis. Yet new technologies, from deepwater oil recovery platforms to hydraulic fracturing on the high plains of the United States and Canada, continue to yield relatively cheap global energy. We are

improving battery storage, the key to making renewable sources more cost-effective and energy-efficient. While not a quick solution, the resources of the Arctic may prove an enormous energy source over time. Of course, we must approach all of this carefully and with a shared sense of responsibility; but compared to where we thought we might be, we are actually doing well in this sector. Indeed, persistent developments in technologies across the energy sector will guarantee world supply for years to come, while adding variety to our energy mix.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are many other successes, large and small, to celebrate. But perhaps the most important is simply the growing shared recognition

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that nations and people must work together to achieve results; avoid war, famine, and plagues; and create a more harmonious and integrated world. Our better angels are winning—slowly to be sure, but my money is on continued improvement in the human condition over the next century. Here at The Fletcher School, we create the leaders who will make it so.

FOR FURTHER READING

Stephen Pinker's work *The Better Angels of Our Nature* also argues that, slowly but surely, humanity is becoming more peaceful and cooperative. For further reading on the potential of science and technological advancements to transform livelihoods, please consider *The Singularity is Near* by Ray Kurzweil. More of my thoughts on confronting the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century can be found in *The Accidental Admiral*.*f*