

## The Road Ahead

# What Really Matters

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We are entering the new year after three years of tumult, uncertainty, loss and disruption. The pandemic that shook the world, and continues to ravage China, has been a once-in-a-century calamity. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a rude shock to the nation-state system that prevailed for two centuries, and to the global order painstakingly established after the Second World War. In the midst of new year revelries, hopes and aspirations, this is a good time to reflect on the lessons of the last three years. Customary wishes and hopes for a new year should be informed by our collective experience of this traumatic period.

Covid pandemic rudely awakened us to the realities of life. For about a century after the Spanish Flu pandemic that took millions of lives in the aftermath of the First World War, humankind has been blessed with better healthcare and ever-increasing lifespans. Covid reminded us that humans are still a fragile species, and we cannot take for granted the simple joys of life and freedom from preventable disease. This pandemic is surely not the last one afflicting humanity; there will be more over time.

Mass vaccination and natural infection across much of the world gave us herd immunity, and the worst is behind us. In many ways we have been lucky: effective and safe vaccines were developed and made available to all of us in record time; and fatalities with covid infection are under 1% of the infected population, and young and otherwise healthy people have been largely spared. The next pandemic could be more problematic – it could be more virulent and deadly, and we may not be able to develop an effective vaccine quickly. It makes sense that we should not revert to complacency once the danger passes.

There are tens of thousands of viruses in nature that could jump species and cause us sickness given the 'right' conditions. These are called zoonotic pathogens. There is no way we can develop and administer thousands of vaccines to save lives. The most important question we should ask of ourselves is, can we prevent or minimize the risk of

zoonosis, or viruses jumping species and causing harm to humanity. The good news is, we can prevent zoonosis by our collective actions as humanity.

Reckless felling of forests in parts of the world is bringing human species and wild animals into close contact. The more we destroy the forests, the greater is the possibility of viruses jumping from these wild animals to us. Eventually some viruses will mutate and spread among humans, and cause sickness. It makes abundant sense that we should, at all costs, prevent further deforestation. Humankind, for over 10,000 years, has been felling forests for raising crops, or building settled communities – villages, towns and cities. If deforestation, particularly in rain forests and other natural forests with dense foliage, continues unchecked, there will inevitably be new pandemics. This challenge has to be addressed globally, because the hotspots are mostly in Brazil, parts of Africa and South East Asia. We need to evolve global mechanisms to stop invading forests even as local livelihoods and economies are protected.

The other cause of zoonosis is the ever-growing demand in some countries for exotic meat of wild animals. There is large scale hunting of wild species like bats and export of meat to the rest of the world. Such exotic meat constitutes a tiny proportion of global food consumption, and is wholly unnecessary. But the dangers of zoonosis increase exponentially with hunting of these wild animals and consumption of exotic meat. Laws already exist prohibiting hunting of wild animals, but no serious efforts are made to enforce them. As long global demand for these exotic foods is not firmly curbed, poor communities will continue to hunt wild life and expose all humanity to zoonotic viruses.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a rude shock to a complacent Europe and world. We have taken the post-world war global order for granted since the end of the Second World War. While there have been several local wars, border skirmishes, and civil wars in some societies, a full scale invasion of another country with an explicit intension to annex it and erase it from global map has not happened since 1945. India entered the then East Pakistan in 1971 in a desperate situation resulting in creation of Bangladesh, and our troops promptly withdrew. China attacked India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1978, but withdrew troops. While border disputes remain, countries are not annexed. The US, with or without UN sanction, has invaded Granada (1983), Panama (1989-90), Haiti (1994-95), Afghanistan (2001-21), and Iraq (2003-11); but it was never to annex a country, or alter the borders of a nation by force, and in each case the US or global community withdrew troops.

For the first time, Russia invaded an independent, sovereign, globally-recognised nation with the explicit intention of annexing the whole of Ukraine or large parts of it. There was never a border dispute between the two countries, and Russia recognised Ukraine as an independent, sovereign nation ever since the Soviet Union voluntarily and peacefully broke up into 15 independent republics. If a small nation with conventional weapons invades another country, the global community can discipline it and restore world order. When Iraq conquered Kuwait, the global community liberated Kuwait with a UN-sanctioned force in 1991. But if a major power with vast nuclear arsenal invades a small neighbour and attempts to subjugate the population by brute force, there is no easy remedy. While it is an existential crisis for the brave Ukrainian people, it is a fundamental challenge to accepted global order. Collapse of global order means we will revert to the world before 20<sup>th</sup> century when any kingdom or country could invade any other country, and might becomes right.

This is particularly sad at a time when we need greater cohesion and collective action as humankind given imperatives of global trade and commerce, the increasing interdependence in the world, and the vital need to combat global challenges of climate change and future pandemics.

If nothing else, the last three years made humanity a cutely aware of what really matters in life, how tenuous and ephemeral our existence could be, and how inextricably interlinked our lives and future are as humankind transcending all barriers of caste, religion, region and nationality. Let us hope that in 2023 and in the years after that, we will fully internalise these lessons and make our individual and collective lives richer and more harmonious. Human society has unprecedented opportunity to fulfill all human potential and eliminate all avoidable suffering in the next few decades. But if we continue to fragment ourselves and fail to respond to global challenges collectively, we will be snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

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