Decision-making Amidst Hyper Geo-Political and Geo-Economic Uncertainty

Zurich CEO Exchange

Centre for Global Enterprise

Speech by
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the Centre for Global Enterprise for inviting me to address you this evening.

It is a pleasure and an honour to speak to so many CEOs.

In my line of work, I usually speak to diplomats or military officers. But a theme that I want to stress this evening is that the worlds of business and geopolitics are merging. Therefore, we need to understand each others' worlds better, talk to each other more, and pull in the same direction when it comes to making sense of a fast-moving geopolitical environment.

Colleagues, I think you would agree that the international system is going through its **most important and turbulent transformation since the end of the Cold War**.

Great powers are colliding or colluding with serious implications for international peace and security.

Rules that governed international relations for decades, and for that matter international trade, have been broken.

In the past decade, we have witnessed a growing number of armed conflicts – from Ukraine to Gaza and the wider Middle East, but also in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and more recently between Thailand and Cambodia. The nature of conflicts is also changing. For example, becoming more protracted, and mixing traditional warfare with new technology.

At the same time we are going through an accelerating ecological crisis. This has short-term impacts such as heatwaves and floods as well as – medium- to long-term consequences, such as air pollution and food insecurity that could have an impact on peace and security.

Adding yet another layer of complexity to this evolving international landscape are **new technologies**. Recent years have seen remarkable advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence, neurotechnologies, synthetic biology, quantum computing, and blockchain.

On the one hand, these technologies offer transformative opportunities such as increased efficiency, automation, cost reduction, and substantial competitive advantages for those companies that successfully adopt and implement them.

On the other hand, these technologies raise profound security implications and risks. They are reshaping geopolitics, conflict and the information space through disinformation. They are also opening new frontiers for on-line fraud. Emerging technologies are in the focus of an intensifying global competition – primarily between the US and China – but affecting every actor worldwide.

These developments also have far-reaching implications for **digital trade**. Digital trade has emerged as both a driver of economic growth and a new domain of geopolitical contestation.

In this sense, it is increasingly subject to digital sovereignty claims, data localization policies as well as competing regulatory regimes. This phenomenon is fragmenting the digital landscape and raising barriers to interoperability, undermining the once-open architecture of global digital markets.

The integration of advanced technologies is also **impacting and transforming global supply chains**. AI-powered logistics, blockchain-based traceability and smart manufacturing are making supply chains, at least in principle, more responsive and efficient. However, these same innovations introduce new vulnerabilities: from cyberattacks to chokepoints in critical raw materials like rare earth elements and semiconductors to name a couple of them. Hence, supply chains are no longer viewed solely through an economic lens; they are now seen as strategic assets in global geopolitical competition.

The traditional boundaries between economy, technology, and security are increasingly blurred. Some companies, such as J.P. Morgan Chase, have decided to actively address this new reality by establishing departments dedicated to geopolitical and geoeconomic risks. Companies cannot ignore this new era of geopolitics which requires the private sector to be actively involved in shaping sustainable solutions to mitigate challenges and leverage the benefits. At the same time, foreign ministries and think tanks are increasingly factoring in the impact of trade and technology on international relations.

Unfortunately, the principles of cooperation, multilateralism and open globalisation that have reigned since the end of the Cold War—and that remain necessary to tackle the existing, upcoming, and even existential issues above—are increasingly challenged. This has a detrimental impact on international relations and international trade.

International trade is far more than an economic tool – it serves as a powerful instrument of geopolitical strategy. Sanctions apply pressure without military force, while trade agreements and investments can reward cooperation and strengthen political alliances.

A major benefit of trade is the creation of economic interdependence, which, again in theory, acts as a deterrent to conflict. When countries are economically interdependent, the cost of war becomes higher, making peaceful resolution more rational.

However, it is also important to mention that the current global trend of democratic decline and rising authoritarianism challenges these assumptions. Authoritarian regimes may be less constrained by public accountability and more willing to use trade coercively or accept the costs of confrontation.

So, what are the **impacts of these developments on leadership and decision-making** in the private sectors?

I would like to touch on three areas: borders, generations and uncertainty and change.

First – Borders.

Rising nationalism and fear-based immigration narratives are fuelling protectionism. We see this reflected in immigration policies that increasingly limit freedoms of movement. These policies favour visa restrictions, sanctions, and give rise to political tensions.

These trends reduce the ability to recruit, retain, and deploy international and diverse talent. So, supply chain vulnerabilities are not only about goods but also human capital. Companies may not be able to place the right people in the right places.

Geopolitical and climate uncertainties also create anxiety for employees and clients. This risks overfocusing on inward-looking preservation mindsets, at the expense of outward looking growth and innovation attitudes.

Second – Generations.

For the first time in history, 5 generations are active, or about to be, in the workforce – Boomers, X, Y, Z, Alpha. Each has different frames of reference, expectations, motivations, and concerns as well as different levels of digital literacy.

A key leadership opportunity will be how to harness and leverage this diversity of energy, ambition, and experience, and how to boost intergenerational learning and collaboration towards a common purpose within a company.

Third – Uncertainty and change.

Rapidly advancing technologies, climate adaptations and the perception of spreading violent conflict are generating the notion of polycrisis – this leads to uncertainty in the workforce, demand for new and highly specialized skills, and requires organisation-wide adaptability.

The pace and wide-ranging nature of change are faster and more interdependent than current education and training systems can provide.

There are also still uncertainty and unrest about how AI will replace many jobs, skills, and provide added value. Intelligence and learning capacity are no longer exclusively human, nor conditioned by time and resources.

With this in mind, what can leaders do?

Invest in resilience – not just as a mindset but as a capability. Create learning ecosystems that develop and deploy skills quickly.

Design two-way intergenerational channels and mentorships. Foster cultures within your companies that encourage staff to experiment and innovate.

Geopolitical trends may be oriented towards a narrowing and dividing of the world. Leadership must do the opposite – it must widen the world:

- **Through Curiosity** – by seeking out, and being a driving force for, innovative solutions to complex challenges.
- **Through Competence** – by investing in building a future capable workforce, both locally and internationally.
- **And through Cooperation** – between business, policymakers, regulators, and international mechanisms like the Sustainable Development Goals.

The volatility and the polarisation of the current geopolitical environment also impact one of the key currencies in business and in diplomacy: **trust**. The key question emerges: **How do we build trust in times of such volatility?**

Trust is vital in business and international relations. Building it is an art and a skill.

This is one of the biggest challenges for diplomats: talking to our enemies, not just our friends. The key is to find points where interests converge, and to appeal to self-interest on both sides. Also to create a degree of predictability and constructive engagement over time, facilitating discreet dialogue as we do at GCSP. At first, the parties will gain trust in the process. With time they may even gain trust in each other. I would think these lessons apply to business leaders as well.

To conclude, I want to leave you with a few ideas of what I think you as CEOs can do.

According to the Gallup Global Leadership Report 2025, geopolitical and climate shocks create anxiety, uncertainty and lack of collective purpose among employees. This leads to growing scepticism, low morale, and a sense of disengagement from society and its ability to create a prosperous future for all.

As heads of organisations, we have a huge capacity and a responsibility to improve the lives of others. Business leaders in particular have a crucial role in **inspiring hope** during turbulent times through their innovative vision, confidence in the future, and ability to create a sense of shared purpose.

Leaders must cultivate a **culture of collective preparedness** and resilience across their organisations. A culture in which people at all levels can step out of their comfort zones to consider disruptive scenarios and develop adaptive skills.

Part of managing instability and change is preparing for them. And preparation begins with developing new skills and resilient mindsets. At GCSP, we support leaders through anticipating and preparing leaders for emerging threats and challenges, both through executive courses and through **strategic foresight**.

It is also useful to have in-house capacity. There is growing awareness about he added value of businesses appointing a **Chief Geopolitical Officer (CGO)**. The CGO could provide a comprehensive and dynamic understanding of geopolitical challenges that may impact the company or institution. Their role would focus on geopolitical analysis – combining strategic foresight, regional expertise, and policy insight – to anticipate disruptions from state actions, regulatory changes, or conflicts.

CEOs can also **widen the talent lens and upskill local workforces** to build resilience into the system. Organisational learning should be approached as a strategic investment, rather than a short-term expense. Invest ahead of demand: in skills for clean energy, digital trust, resilient logistics, and responsible AI.

In today's world, marked by geopolitical and geoeconomic uncertainty, the **ability to adapt and innovate** has never been more of a strategic imperative.

The GCSP serves as a convenor and catalyst in this space. For example, through our projects on defence innovation, we bring together military, diplomatic, and civilian leaders to map the state of defence innovation and examine its drivers and challenges. But most importantly, we provide a platform to share best practices and insights to advance a cooperative, ethical, and political way forward to address this security issue.

These initiatives remind us that, whether in commerce or security, leadership in uncertain times requires intentional innovation.

Business leaders stand at the frontline of this transformation. Their role is not only to manage risks but to drive an innovative agenda that shapes positive change; one that benefits not only their companies but also society and long-term global stability.

To conclude, in a turbulent world, businesses need to understand geopolitics. But they can also shape it and help their companies absorb shocks and seize opportunities. Decision-making can be informed by drawing on organizations such as GCSP that are designed to help its partners identify and manage risks in a complex environment.

I believe we need more interactions like this. Indeed, perhaps in the future CGE and GCSP can team up to have a CEO exchange with representatives of UN Member States and Geneva-based intergovernmental organizations.

Thank you for your attention and cheers.