

# Complexity is Destiny: Orientation in a Fragmented Global Landscape

This briefing document synthesizes the insights of Peter Maurer—President of the Basel Institute on Governance and former President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)—regarding the challenges of navigating global complexity. It explores the erosion of trust, the shift in geopolitical norms, the role of technological disruption, and the enduring resilience of human dignity.

## Executive Summary

The primary obstacle to managing modern global complexity is not the difficulty of the issues themselves, but the "decomposition of truth and trust." This erosion of a shared reality inhibits the capacity of leaders to address interconnected crises such as climate change and regional conflict. While the Western world perceives the current era as uniquely dangerous, this perspective often overlooks the long-standing instability experienced in the Global South.

Furthermore, the international order is currently characterized by a tension between traditional multilateralism and "disruptive" geopolitical strategies. While high-risk, disruption is seen by some as a necessary tool to unblock frozen conflicts that the post-1945 system failed to resolve. In the realm of technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents a dual path: it can serve as a powerful tool to reduce complexity and support human judgment, or it can become an instrument for societal control. Despite these systemic pressures, the fundamental resilience and desire for dignity among individuals remain the primary drivers for a hopeful future.

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## The Crisis of Truth and Trust

The most significant concern in the current global climate is the fundamental questioning of truth and the prevalence of deep-seated mistrust. Maurer argues that complexity arises less from the interrelation of complicated issues and more from the inhibited capacity to deal with them.

- **The Engine of Complexity:** When truth is contested in the public arena—often through the use of fast, powerful technologies—it becomes impossible to build the consensus needed to address mega-trends like population growth or technological transformation.
- **The Failure of Trust-Building:** Traditional diplomatic approaches to trust-building (common during the Cold War) are currently failing. In an environment of "prevalent mistrust," any effort to build trust is often perceived as a complicating factor, ultimately generating further suspicion rather than alleviating it.
- **A Historical Perspective on Disruption:** While every generation believes its experiences are uniquely disruptive, the current "fundamental questioning of what is true" represents a significant and worrying departure from historical norms.

# Perspectives on Global Danger and Insecurity

There is a notable disparity in how different regions perceive the current state of global danger.

- **Euro-Atlantic vs. Global South:** In Western Europe and the transatlantic area, there is a strong sense that the world has become more dangerous. Conversely, those in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia view this "dangerous place" as their long-standing reality, suggesting that the West is merely "normalizing" to a global standard of crisis.
- **The "Scissor Opening":** A critical danger lies in the gap between worsening scientific indicators (such as those for climate change) and the political incapacity to respond. This incapacity is directly linked to the aforementioned lack of trust.

## Geopolitics: Multilateralism vs. Disruption

The international arena is witnessing a shift away from the norms established in 1945 toward a more disruptive and power-based form of diplomacy.

### The Role of Disruption

Maurer expresses ambivalence toward "disruptive policies," such as those introduced by the United States.

- **Potential Benefits:** Disruption may be the only way to "unblock" chronic conflicts (e.g., Iran non-proliferation or Israel-Palestine) that the previous multilateral system was patently incapable of solving.
- **High-Risk Enterprise:** The danger is that strategically introduced disruption could lead to "burning platforms" and increased violence rather than sustainable solutions.

### The Resilience of Institutions

Despite the rise of disruptive practices, traditional institutions like the United Nations and NATO demonstrate surprising resilience.

- **Historical Cycles:** Institutions and norms rarely dissolve entirely; they often move to the "basement of the museum" only to resurface years later when a new approach or leadership (such as a new UN Secretary-General) reinvents them.
- **End of the 1945 Order:** While the "abolition of war" and the "outlawing of the use of force" have been pushed aside by new practices, the old system is not dead but temporarily sidelined.

## Governance and Artificial Intelligence

AI is transforming governance and decision-making by offering new ways to manage complexity, though it introduces significant ethical frontiers.

AI Development Area	Description	Impact
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<b>Standardization</b>	Use of AI to structure processes in industry and administration.	Increased effectiveness, efficiency, and impact; rationalization of redundant work.
<b>Human Interface</b>	The intersection of AI with human ingenuity, judgment, and leadership.	AI serves as a support tool for strategic reasoning and human instinct in complex negotiations.
<b>Control vs. Capacity</b>	The "watertight ambivalence" of technological application.	Risk that AI may be used to control and "decapacitate" societies rather than empower them to solve problems.

## Resilience and the Optimism of Dignity

Despite witnessing "the worst humans can do" through roles at the ICRC, Maurer maintains an optimistic outlook based on practical experience rather than scientific proof.

- **Human Resilience:** Observations of people in the worst circumstances reveal an enormous capacity for imagination and finding solutions.
- **The Preservation of Humanity:** Even in conflict, there is a "basic humanity" that can be preserved.
- **The Desire for Dignity:** The prevailing hope is that individuals will always seek to carve out space to live "decent and dignified lives," even under the most restrictive or dominant regimes. This natural resilience suggests that the "coin" of the future may yet fall on the side of human dignity rather than total control.

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## Notable Quotes

"Complexity originates not from the fact that these are complicated issues and that they are interrelated, but that the capacity to deal with it is increasingly inhibited by the fact that there is no trust and there is profound disagreement what truth is."

"When there is a prevalence of mistrust, then any effort to build trust becomes again a complicating factor and an element of generating more mistrust."

"People in Africa, Latin America, and some places of Asia... say, 'Well, it has always been a dangerous place. Welcome to the club. You finally realize what it is to live in a dangerous place.'"

"I'm not so sure whether history is ever over... things disappear temporarily in the basement of the museum, but then... they resurface."

"I have learned about the enormous resilience of people... people will wish to live decent and dignified lives, and they will, even in worst circumstances, try to carve out the space in which they survive in dignity."