1. The Civilisational Transition and the Fragmentation of the Global Order

The turbulence defining the world today is the product of two great transitions unfolding at the same time. The first is a civilisational transition from the Industrial Age to the information-based Systems Age, which is dislocating economies, societies, and technologies, creating a polycrisis. The second is a world-order transition: the demise of the liberal international order that has organised global affairs since 1945. As that order fractures, the multilateral institutions built to manage instability are eroding, degrading the world's capacity to respond to the crises the civilisational transition is producing, creating a metacrisis. The combined polycrisis and metacrisis has now entered its most critical phase with the United States no longer willing to continue its role as the guarantor of global stability and multilateralism. This ushers in great instability and crises, creating a hypercrisis of unprecedented scale and scope.

1. The Gap in the Civilisational Transition: Polycrisis

i. From the Industrial Age to the Systems Age

In the trajectory of human history, a small number of transitions rise to the level of civilisational change, ones in which the basis of value creation, social organisation, and political power is fundamentally remade. The Agricultural Revolution gave rise to settled societies, property rights, and social stratification. The Industrial Revolution shifted the basis of wealth from land to mechanised production, eclipsing the great land-based empires and driving the largest rural-to-

urban migration in history. Each such transition dismantled an existing system and gave rise to a new era of civilisation, and each was disruptive and often destructive to the way of life it replaced.

The world is currently in another such shift: from the Industrial Age to the Systems Age, where the Information Age is a staging post. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century with the semiconductor and accelerating through personal computing and the internet, information increasingly became the primary medium informing economic, social and political organisation. Today, the transition has reached its decisive phase, driven by artificial intelligence and digital networks, heralding the beginning of the Systems Age, where value, power, and legitimacy increasingly flow not through territory, production, or institutions, but through the systems that organise intelligence, capital, energy, and information at scale. Authority migrates toward those who can adopt, scale, and control these systems, while actors tied to legacy structures experience relative decline and are vulnerable to subjugation.

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Crucially, this transition is faster, deeper, and more compressed than its predecessors: intelligent digital technologies compress into years adjustments that once unfolded across generations, with significant implications for the world's ability to respond and adjust to the transition.

ii. The Polycrisis: A Cascade of Crises with Reinforcing Feedback Loops

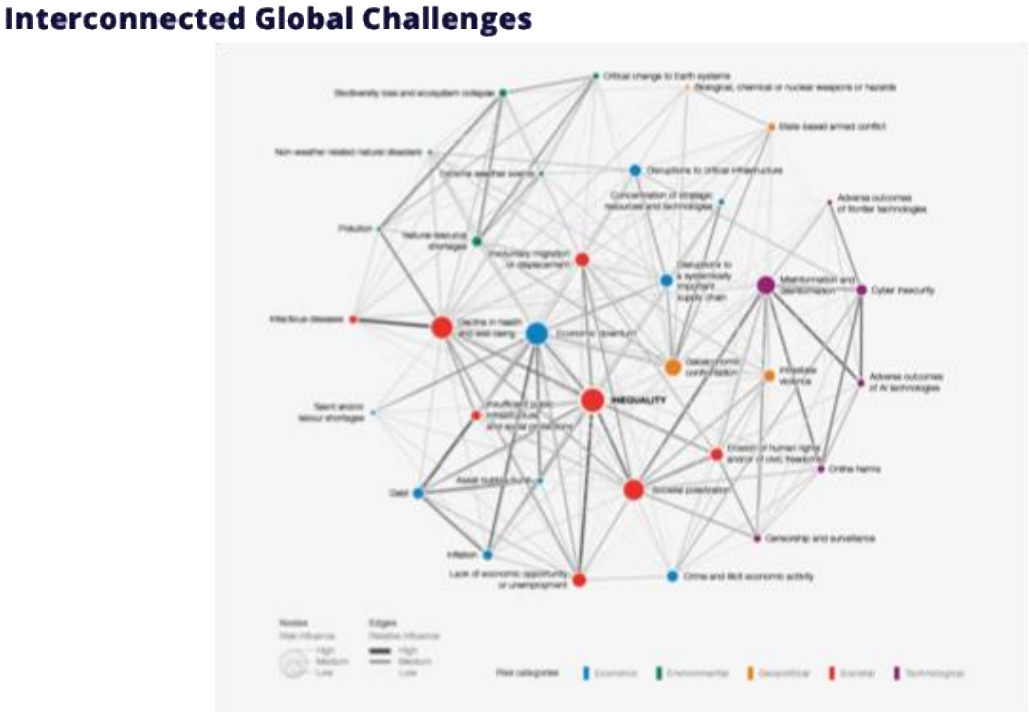
The most visible expression of this transition is the currently unfolding polycrisis, the dense cluster of technological, economic, social, environmental, and geopolitical dislocations unfolding simultaneously and interacting with one another across the world today.[2] This has resulted in geoeconomic confrontation, interstate conflict, extreme weather, societal polarisation, and mis– and disinformation now sitting at the top of the global risk register,[3] and breaking records in terms of their scale and scope. These include:

- Armed conflict at a post-WWII high. 65 state-based armed conflicts were recorded in 2025, the highest number in over seven decades.[4]
- Hottest year ever. 2024 was the warmest year on record at about 1.55°C above the 1850–1900 pre-industrial average,[5] and 2025 trailing only slightly as the second hottest year ever.[6]
- Record forced displacement. By the end of 2024 an estimated 123.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, almost double the level of a decade ago.[7]
- Record global public debt. Global public debt reached a record US$102 trillion in 2024, with the IMF projecting it to approach 100% of world GDP by the end of the decade.[8]
- Institutional disengagement at scale. The United States has withdrawn from 66 international organisations since January 2026, the largest single act of multilateral disengagement in the post-war era.[9]

Moreover, uncertainty has become the defining theme of the global outlook,[10] with the US Economic Policy Uncertainty Index at its highest level on record, exceeding even the peaks of the Great Depression, the 2008 financial crisis, and the pandemic, and with the global index at or near record highs.[11] What makes the polycrisis distinct from a simple accumulation of shocks is its structure: it is a cascade with feedback loops and multidirectional causality.

The crises do not line up in a single chain of cause and effect; they reinforce one another in multiple directions. Economic inequality erodes trust and fuels populism; populism utilises the institutions to exacerbate societal division and disruption; environmental stress deepens economic insecurity and drives migration; migration stokes fear and intolerance; mis– and disinformation corrodes the shared factual basis required for any collective response, which in turn intensifies polarisation. Inequality has been identified as the single most interconnected risk, a node that propagates stress outward into many others.[12] Because causality runs in many directions, a failure in one accelerates failure in the rest, and the system deteriorates more than the sum of all shocks individually would suggest.

Figure 1: Interconnected Global Challenges



Source: World Economic Forum

These dislocations are features of the era shift underway. The coexistence of an industrial order straining to survive and an emerging Systems-Age order not yet consolidated produces sharp instability: jobs risk being lost at scale, with nearly two-fifths (39%) of current skills due to become obsolete within five years,[13] wealth concentrates to owners of assets, as the labour share of income falls,[14] long-held rights are increasingly eroded,[15] and trusted civic institutions lose authority.[16]

Crisis, fragmentation, and institutional strain are therefore not aberrations of the transition but expected features of it. While over the long term the shift toward a new civilisational platform is irreversible, the path to it is chaotic and undetermined. Managing the transition might moderate the more extreme swings, but that is not the world of today.

2. Fracturing of the Liberal International Order: Metacrisis

i. The Decline of Global Order

Concurrent with the civilisational transition, and increasingly entangled with it, is a second transition: the demise of the world order that has organised global affairs since the middle of the twentieth century. The liberal international order, constructed after the Second World War, was built on the pillars of multilateral institutions, the rule of law, open markets, and democratic norms. In its most recent guise, the post-Cold War, unipolar, United States-led neoliberal order of 1990 to 2020, extended those pillars globally on the assumption that liberal democracy and open markets would expand indefinitely delivering superior net benefits. These assumptions, born of the optimism that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the resulting belief in an "end of history",[17] were shattered by the shocks of 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, and the pandemic, populist revolt, and great-power competition that followed.

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Since then, the order has further fractured across several reinforcing dimensions:

I. Geoeconomic Competition as War by Other Means. Diplomacy and trade competition has given way to economic and technological force; the value of global imports hit by new restrictions rose more than fourfold in 2025, the sharpest spike in over fifteen years of WTO monitoring.[18]

II. A Power Divide Enforced by Might not Law. The system has split into states that can project military, economic, and technological power with impunity and those forced to absorb it. Ukraine and Gaza mark a darker turn in asymmetric war waged in world view, where might is unconstrained; record world military spending of $2.9 trillion followed in 2025.[19]

III. Multilateral Fragmentation into Power Blocs. The rules-based order is being replaced by interest-driven power blocs, the Sino-Russian "no limits" partnership, the Russia–Iran pact, the US–Israel partnership, and a BRICS+ whose combined output significantly exceeds the G7's.[20]

IV. The Retreat of Trade and Shifting of Economic Gravity. Global trade has slipped from around 61% of world GDP in 2008 to 56.8% in 2024, even as China's share of world GDP has surged from c.2% in 2000 to c.17% today,[21] cooperation in the West contracting exactly as the balance of economic weight tips East.

V. Financial and Monetary Fragmentation. The dollar's share of global reserves has fallen to about 57%, the lowest since the mid-1990s,[22] as states quietly seek to structurally reduce US exposure, even as global capital continues to flow into US equities.[23]

VI. The Weaponisation of Interdependence: Chokepoints and Moats. Linkages that once bound states together are now instruments of coercion – US tariffs on China; China retaliation with export controls on semiconductors, rare earths, and critical minerals – provide a new template of economic power emerges: control a chokepoint (a strait, fab, cloud region, payment rail, satellite) and you control dependent.

VII. A New Military-Industrial-Technological Complex. State power and frontier technologies are driving an unprecedented scale of investment, competition, anti-regulation, and defence contractor lobbying spend. One stark result is the use of AI targeting systems in live wars, reported to prosecute roughly one hundred strikes in a single day of conflict.[24]

VIII. The Capture and Mining of Cognitive Awareness Beyond Accountability. A new front of conquest is taking shape, as small numbers of AI-enabled platforms now mediate what billions see, turning platforms into infrastructure, surveillance apparatus, and influence engine; allowing for industrial-scale extraction and redirection of belief.[25]

IX. Democratic Erosion. The average global citizen now lives under a level of democracy that has fallen back to that of 1985, with autocracies outnumbering democracies for the first time in over two decades.[26]

X. Impunity as Policy: The Flexible Rules of War and Human Rights. International law is enforced on the weak and waived for the strong, and the double standard is no longer disguised. While the war in Ukraine and Gaza, have shifted global public opinion, they have also demonstrated the ability of Russia and Israel to ignore them.

XI. The Defunding of the Multilateral System. The machinery of collective action is seeing its budget cut and gradually being defunded, threatening to weaken if not destroy effective checks on might is right.[27]

XII. Arms Control Dismantlement: No Binding Limits, First Time in 50 Years. Guardrails are lowered: violations go unpunished, emboldening the next violator, while treaties are being dismantled piece by piece, [28] and the norm of peaceful conflict resolution is undermined. For the first time in over 50 years, there is no binding limit on the world's two largest nuclear arsenals, which together hold roughly 90% of all warheads. [29]

Underlying each of the above is a change in the mechanisms of how the world system works. At a macro level, the change is from cooperative– and rules-based to competitive and leverage based. The cumulative effect is a material reduction in the world’s capacity to respond to the polycrisis. This is the metacrisis, a condition in which governance, economic, and normative structures are so weakened or misaligned that they lack the capacity to resolve the challenges they were designed to contain.

ii. The Pivotal Role of the US in this Transition

The US, given its superpower primacy, operated for decades as the guarantor of the global order, and is a structurally distinct component of the system itself. Changes to the US position, captured in its 2025 US National Security Strategy (US NSS), changes the mechanism of operation of the world system. Five pivotal characteristics are highlighted here.

Loss of the US as the critical world system regulating actor.

- *Mechanism: when a single node performs a function, its withdrawal does not redistribute the function, it ends it.*
- For nearly 70 years, global stability rested on the US enforcing norms and absorbing the cost of doing so, in exchange for outsized gains. The US NSS ends this bargain, shifting to "sovereign mercantilism" and recasting past commitments – free trade, multilateral institutions, allied security – as costs to be recovered rather than investments made.
- *Implication: With no parallel capacity elsewhere, the system loses its regulating function tending to chaos.*

Leverage has replaced rules as the currency of power.

- *Mechanism: transactions bypass the shared regulatory layer, which erodes through neglect, rather than dismantlement.*
- "Balanced trade," "re-shoring," "critical minerals," "energy dominance", the vocabulary of control over supply chains and resources has displaced the vocabulary of rules-based alliance-building. US multilateral commitments are migrating away from being foundational, with the US NSS viewing them as constraints to be shed through intentional disengagement.
- *Implication: The system loses the power of rules, tends to voluntary use, losing regulatory authority.*[30]

Allies have become counterparties in a series of transactions.

- *Mechanism: a guarantee relies on certainty; conditionality converts it to a probability, and dependency vanishes.*
- Europe, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Australia are evaluated under the US NSS for what value they can contribute rather than guaranteed as important nodes in the system of US power. China and Russia by contrast are seen as power-players to manage rather than contain, based on a strategy that names great-power dominance itself as "a timeless truth of international relations," a truth available to any power large enough to claim it.
- *Implication: The resulting system punishes weakness and rewards strength and so tends towards coalitions for mutual protection.*

Withdrawal is a mechanism for deconstructing the system.

- *Mechanism: shared institutions require minimum funding, validation, and participation; the exit of a major contributor moves capacity below operating threshold.*

- The US has exited the INF Treaty (2019), Open Skies (2020), New START (2026), and the Paris Agreement, withdrew from UNESCO, the WHO, and the UN Human Rights Council, and in January 2026 exited 66 further multilateral bodies in a single action, 31 of them UN entities, including the UNFCCC, UNFPA, UN Women, and UNCTAD, the largest set of exits from the postwar order in its history.
- *Implications: What is removed is not one member but the systems pooled capacity and verification architecture, leaving remaining participants operating a degraded system.* [31,32]

Breaking rules at scale and speed sets new norms.

- *Mechanism: norm stability depends on the expectation of enforcement; norm breach by the enforcer inverts that signal, and non-compliance costs fall system wide.*
- Power-transition scholarship since Thucydides holds that a hegemon sensing its position narrowing acts with greater urgency, not less, and when the state that wrote the rules breaks them openly, it demonstrates that they can be broken. [33] Other powers now act with less expectation that violations carry consequence, and each unpunished breach becomes the new baseline.
- *Implication: The system increasingly struggles to deliver consequences, requiring interested party collaboration and willingness for these to bear consequences.*

Metacrises are a feature of changing era. The collapse of the Western Roman order dissolved the administrative, fiscal, and security institutions that had held the Mediterranean world together for centuries, a world no successor has reconstituted since. [34] The transition out of medieval Christendom culminated in the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), in which existing institutions failed as initially limited grievances compounded into continental catastrophe, until the construction of a new order at Westphalia.[35] The interwar League of Nations was rendered progressively less capable of doing its job by the very aggression it was built to constrain, until it could neither deter nor broker resolution, and the world slid into catastrophe.[36]

The changes pave the way for a new power projection system that can utilise America's unique position of primacy in markets, trade, economics, security, science and technology and military. The rest of the world may not have fully realized the seriousness of the intent, let alone framed a response, but the US NSS has been clear about its new modus operandi. History suggests that this does not renew power,[37] but that is unlikely to halt the march.

The metacrisis is no longer a passive absence of governing capacity but an actively produced one

The implication? The metacrisis is no longer a passive absence of governing capacity but an actively produced one, the system's historic underwriter is now dismantling the machinery of collective response precisely as the crises requires it most. The question left to everyone else? Can the rest of the world build and fund the guarantees, institutions, and enforcement the order once received from the US, without the power that supplied them, and sometimes in opposition to the US, and without waiting for it to return?

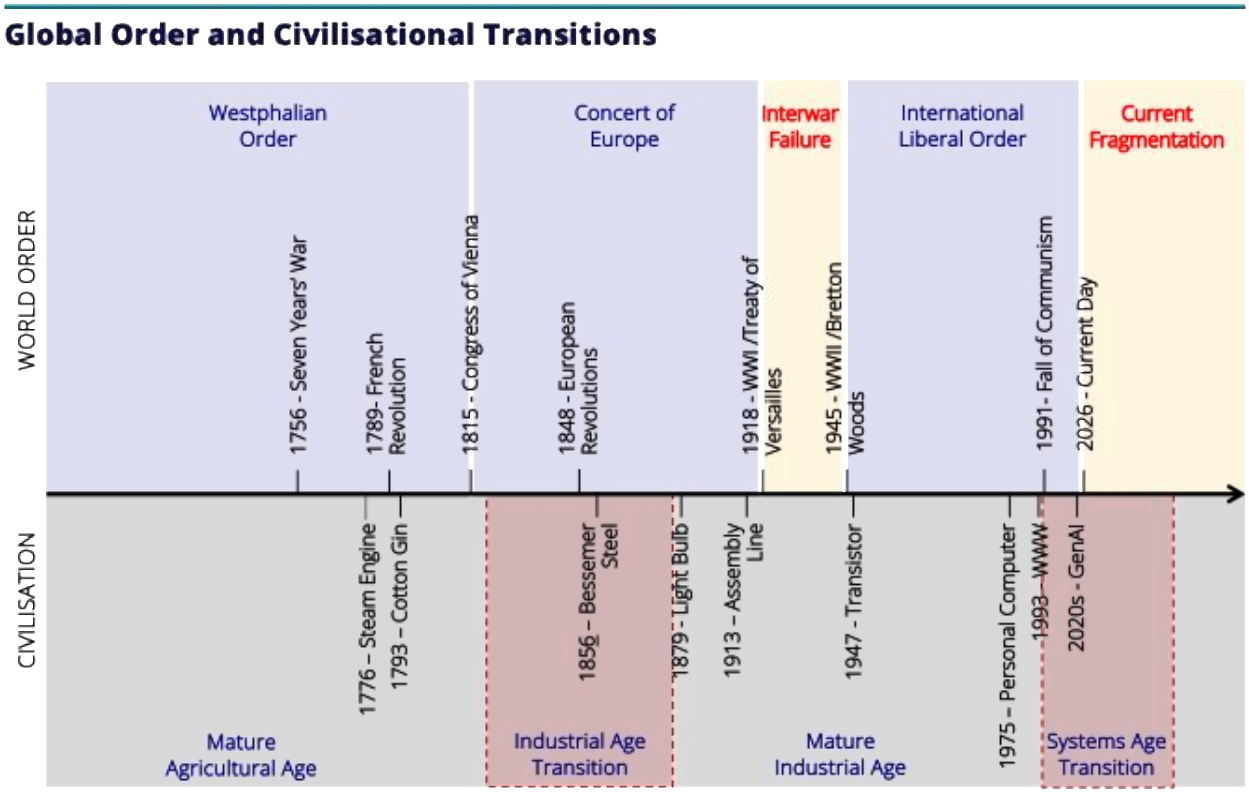
3. The "Stacking" of Transitions: Hypercrisis

i. When the Metacrisis Becomes a Driver: The Hypercrisis

The danger of the present moment lies in the simultaneity of two transitions: a civilisational transition or a world-order transition, running concurrently in the midst of a polycrisis and a metacrisis

Earlier civilisational transitions moved in times that were not characterised by the speed of today's digital media communications and physical travel speeds. Moreover, the last transition – the Industrial Revolution – unfolded largely during the Concert of Europe, a stable 'world' order which absorbed shocks, contained revolutions and persisted over nearly a century after 1815. Today these buffers are gone; the Systems-Age transition generates a cascade of crises precisely as the world-order transition strips away the institutions that might contain them.

Figure 2: Civilisational and World Order Transition Aligning



Source: Force for Good, 2026

There is, however, a further and more dangerous turn. When world orders collapse, the institutional capacity to manage crises collapses with them. The interwar period is the clearest example: the League of Nations could not contain the Great Depression, coordinate a response to the rise of fascism, or prevent the descent into a second world war, not because the crises were unmanageable in principle but because the institutional architecture to manage them was ineffective. Yet even that failure occurred during a period of relative technological stability: the second industrial revolution had largely run its course, and no civilisational technology transition

was compounding the disorder. What the present moment introduces on top of this is something without historical precedent: a civilisational technological transition of the first order is underway, and on top of it, the orderer itself is not merely failing to respond to the resulting polycrisis but is actively contributing to and seeking to benefit from it. Tariff regimes deployed as coercive instruments, security guarantees withdrawn as leverage, multilateral institutions abandoned or actively undermined. In the absence of checks, the broken system itself becomes a generator of new crises. This is the hypercrisis: the point at which the metacrisis feeds back into the polycrisis, accelerating it.

> When world orders collapse, the institutional capacity to manage crises collapses as well. The League of Nations' failure to prevent the Second World War was not because it was inevitable, but because the architecture to prevent it failed.

The dynamic of hypercrisis is evidenced starkly in the Middle East. US–Israel military action against Iran disrupts shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, which carries a fifth of global oil. This triggers global energy markets shock, inflation, severed and rerouted supply chains, and escalation risks drawing in further powers.[38] Propagation of disruption across the economic, energy, security, and geopolitical domains simultaneously is a function of coupling, and conflict duration routinely exceeds expected timelines, extending exposure well past the point any buffer was planned for. In this case, the US as the prime actor and having forsaken the multilateral system neutralised itself as an agent that can contain the duration and spread, providing a stark warning on the limits of might.

ii. A Dangerous Moment Unfolding in Real Time

The "stacking" of transitions makes the present exceptionally dangerous, and the speed of change is central to the risk: dislocations occur faster than institutions can adapt, and decision time is compressed to a degree no previous era faced. Yet that same speed is also a source of opportunity. Unlike the transitions facing peoples of past civilisational, where change was slower,[39] we are observing our transition in real time.[40,41] That visibility is a double-edged sword in tension with the need to act quickly before the moment is lost. The question is therefore not whether we can see what is happening, but whether we can act on what we see before it compounds beyond reach.

The remainder of this report is concerned not primarily with how to defend the order that is passing, it will need defending so as to preserve the rules that are much required in dangerous transitions, but to determine how to manage both the civilisational and the world-order transitions, and to turn a moment of acute danger into the foundation of a more secure, sustainable, and superior order.

In Summary

- Two transitions are unfolding at once. A civilisational transition from the Industrial Age to the Systems Age runs concurrently with a world-order transition – the demise of the liberal international order – and the interaction of the two defines the danger of the moment.
- The polycrisis is measurable and worsening. 65 state-based armed conflicts in 2025 – the highest since 1946; 123 million forcibly displaced; global public debt past US$100 trillion; the US has withdrawn from 66 international organisations since January 2026; and the three most recent years are the warmest in 176 years of records.
- The liberal international order is fracturing. Built in the aftermath of the Second World War, the order is fracturing, as the current US administration sees strategic value in not being bound by its rules, creating fault lines running across trade, alliances, blocs, economic power, and democratic norms.
- The polycrisis is a cascade, not a list. The technological, economic, social, and environmental dislocations of the transition reinforce one another through feedback loops and multidirectional causality, so the system tips further toward disorder than its individual shocks would suggest.
- Fragmentation produces the metacrisis. As the order fractures, the institutional architecture for managing crises erodes with it. Multilateral structures, institutions, and norms erode, degrading the world's capacity to respond to the polycrisis. This degraded capacity is the metacrisis, and it occurs in every historical order transition.
- Stacked transitions create a hypercrisis. With a polycrisis and a metacrisis occurring together – and when the collapse of the governing architecture actively feeds back into the crises it was designed to contain, the result is a hypercrisis: a condition in which disorder compounds faster than any single intervention can address it.
- The current transition is without precedent. In previous transitions the order's failure was passive, its architecture eroding or fracturing. In the present moment the system's leading power, under its current administration, has become an active source of instability, using the instruments of the order it built as tools of unilateral leverage, and becoming an active generator of new crises.
- The current moment is without precedent. In previous order transitions, failure was passive, the architecture eroded and left a vacuum. In the present moment, the order's historic underwriter is an active source of instability, converting a governance gap into an accelerator.

2. Three Systems in Transition

Three systems determine how the transition resolves: human development, planetary stability, and technology governance. Conventionally treated as separate agendas, they do not behave separately. Each alters the trajectory of the other two, development failure compounds climate vulnerability; climate disruption destroys the productive capacity that development depends on; and technological governance determines whether the tools available to address both are broadly accessible or narrowly held. Technology often been seen as the lever of power acquisition, has a particularly prominent role to play. The failure of one raises the cost of resolving the second and narrows the window for the third. Managing the transition requires all three to move together, and the hypercrisis described in the preceding section is, in large part, the consequence of all three moving in the wrong direction at once.

1. Three Systems Determine the Transition

The world's challenges manifesting as a hypercrisis cross a wide range of domains: geopolitical fragmentation; conflicts, active or escalating, across multiple theatres; democratic backsliding; rising economic inequality and degrading social cohesion; the loss of biodiversity and the breach of six of the nine planetary boundaries that define the safe operating space for human civilisation;[42] food and water insecurity affecting billions; and the ungoverned diffusion of technologies whose governance frameworks lag years behind their capabilities. None of these challenges are minor or peripheral, and each carries a threat to systemic stability.

However, a subset of challenges determines whether the shift to the Systems Age is managed or chaotic. Three challenges stand apart in this regard:

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