[**A troubled world in 2022**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1667351/a-troubled-world-in-2022)

[Maleeha Lodhi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8829/maleeha-lodhi)Published January 3, 2022 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

THE start of the new year is when one looks ahead to identify key global trends and risks in the coming year and consider whether any geopolitical shifts can be expected. What are the newer challenges that may emerge and longer standing ones that will be reinforced? Many think tanks across the world undertake such assessments as do leading international publications and investment firms.

The coronavirus pandemic that overwhelmed the world over the past two years will continue to pose a challenge in 2022. The pandemic’s new phase triggered in late 2021 by the Omicron variant dampened hopes that the virus would be defeated by vaccination drives. By the start of the year the world braced itself for another surge and emergence of vaccine resistant variants. Europe and the US struggled with a ‘[tsunami of cases](https://www.dawn.com/news/1666656/who-warns-of-covid-tsunami-as-omicron-variant-fuels-record-surges)’ as fears grew that the new wave would also engulf Asia.

**Read more:** [*Resurgent Covid sours New Year festivities*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1666926/resurgent-covid-sours-new-year-festivities)

2022 will see countries deal with the multifaceted, disruptive fallout of Covid, and above all, its economic consequences especially stagflation as growth slows and inflation rises across the world. Global supply chain disruptions are expected to continue pushing up prices. Most assessments see inflation as a key global trend in 2022, which will jeopardise economic recovery.

The geopolitics of vaccines will continue as will vaccine diplomacy and the grim reality of unequal access to vaccination by rich and developing countries. The lesson of the past year has gone largely unlearnt — that no one is protected unless everyone is protected. Yet vaccine disparities persist, urging the WHO chief to again call for an end to “global vaccine inequity”. Tom Standage, editor of the *Economist*’s ‘*World Ahead in 2022*’ publication, optimistically counts among the top 10 trends the transition of the pandemic to an endemic as a result of anti-viral pills, upgraded vaccines and antibody treatments. But he concludes tellingly that the virus will remain deadly in the developing world while rich countries will extricate themselves from Covid.

Trends point to an unsettled world with global solidarity and leadership in short supply.

The lack of global solidarity witnessed during the pandemic is another trend likely to persist in many areas this year. Despite assertions by the world’s big powers to strengthen multilateralism and international cooperation, the reality has been different with competition rather than collaboration being the dominant dynamic. Countries’ preoccupation with domestic problems will also weaken global cooperation. The annual Strategic Survey by the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies identifies “the cooperation gap in various key areas” as a top trend which is already evident. But it also cites some “cooperation successes” including the new START treaty and COP26 (on climate change). The larger picture, however, is of dynamics driving greater division in the world. In similar vein, the *Financial Times* in a recent editorial described “serious failings of international coordination and cooperation” as a danger in the context of the pandemic. But this is also more widely applicable to a world where the key strategic driver of events is tensions between big powers. Far from abating these have intensified — a trend also expected to assert itself in the year ahead. East-West tensions will continue to contribute to an increasingly fragmented international system.

**Read more:** [*China brands US democracy ‘weapon of mass destruction’*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1663309)

The world’s most consequential relationship is that between the US and China. The course of relations between them will be the most significant geopolitical dynamic in 2022. Their confrontation may take a more dangerous turn if [tensions over Taiwan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1653378) spin out of control despite efforts to manage them by high-level bilateral contacts. Most assessments see tensions between them as a top risk with their tech war leading to increasing bifurcation of the digital world. One result of their competition, according to Ian Bremmer, head of the Eurasia group, would be “a decoupling of the vying powers and a world where nations become more commercially aligned with either China or the United States”. This in fact may be a key question this year — whether many countries will be obliged to fall into alignments with one or the other even if they may not want to choose between them.

A weak geopolitical order is a trend forecast by Control Risks, a UK-based consultancy group. It sees this as emerging from the absence of a dominant global power that sets the terms and conditions for global trade and international security. This in turn has resulted from “America’s broader retreat into domestic concerns and pivot towards further east” as also “symbolised by its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan”. One consequence is increased chances of regional or local intra-state conflicts erupting or intensifying. The IISS survey for example sees this trend epitomised by Ethiopia’s internal conflict. Others see possibilities of longer-standing regional flashpoints threatening international stability.

Technological shifts will continue by leaps and bounds even as Big Tech will be exposed to greater scrutiny for both its monopolistic practices and harmful content. The *Wall Street Journal* described this as one of last year’s main tech events that will shape the future. The *Economist* report calls it a Techlash. Even so, the digital world that became so pervasive in people’s lives in the pandemic will continue to influence the way people work, communicate, entertain themselves and shop.

Another trend is of escalating humanitarian crises in different parts of the world which is highlighted in several assessments especially by UN agencies. Humanitarian needs are expected to reach a record level in the year ahead, the result of a combination of conflict, pandemic and climate change. The UN’s relief agency OCHA has launched an appeal for an unprecedented $41 billion to help 183 million people who need life-saving assistance across the world. Among these the [dire situation in Afghanistan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1665412) stands out, which has been worsening despite recent international efforts to step up humanitarian aid. The geopolitical consequences of a humanitarian catastrophe are all too apparent. In its list of the top 12 risks for 2022 the Washington-based Atlantic Council points to the danger of state collapse in Afghanistan with far-reaching repercussions for the world.

The likely trends in 2022 mean that the world will remain in an unsettled and volatile phase in which overlapping challenges will test governments at a time when international solidarity and leadership will be in short supply.

*The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.*

*Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2022*