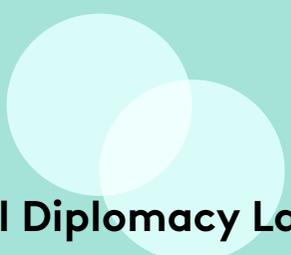




Proactively managing global challenges



A policy brief by the **Global Diplomacy Lab**¹

Abstract: A group of Global Diplomacy Lab members conducted a strategic foresight project to discuss long-term global challenges and proactive approaches to solving them. They chose the following critical global challenges that urgently require attention: the emergence of climate tipping points, global shocks triggering a severe global economic crisis, and the further erosion of multilateralism. Three strategic options were proposed to address these challenges. Firstly, the UN could implement a binding zero-emission mechanism to reduce the risks that tipping points will occur. Secondly, the UN could develop guidelines and protocols for anti-protectionist measures. Thirdly, the UN could establish regional Security Councils to regain effectiveness and strengthen its legitimacy.

In March 2021, 13 members of the Global Diplomacy Lab (GDL) from 13 different countries² met online in a series of strategic foresight workshops³ to discuss global challenges and proactive approaches to solving them. The goal of this strategic foresight project was to identify and assess global challenges and to develop innovative, comprehensive and robust strategic policy options to address the most critical of these challenges. The participants successfully did so in only nine hours of workshop time. [A schematic illustration of the methodological approach described below is available online.](#)

The workshop was facilitated by Johannes Gabriel from [Foresight Intelligence](#), a strategic foresight consultancy based in Berlin.

I Introduction

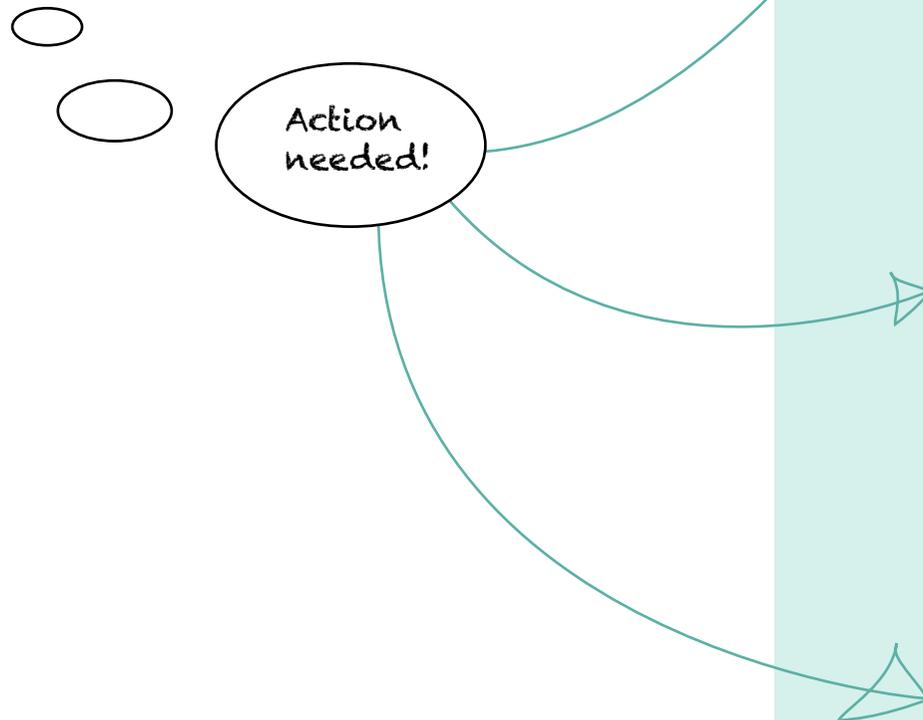
We, a group of Global Diplomacy Lab members, conducted a strategic foresight project to stimulate the strategic foreign policy discourse. Strategic foresight is actor-dependent because it ultimately aims to encourage policy planners and decision-makers to prepare for and manage an uncertain future.

As a diverse group, we do not represent the goals of a single country or entity but rather an international community of policy actors dedicated to addressing the global challenges that keep us from achieving the most important long-term goals, primarily those associated with the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement. We are therefore writing this policy brief as a recommendation to the United Nations, embodying the perspective of the international community.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH:

The group process started with a structured brainstorming of mid-term (5–10 year) goals which the group then ranked according to their urgency and importance.

The participants focused on three particularly urgent and important goals that, if not addressed, would also seriously compromise the chances of achieving the remaining goals. These three key goals were defined as follows:



- Countering the spread of misinformation and disinformation:

This refers to the current resurgence of false information that is created and spread intentionally or unintentionally via traditional and social media, causing deception and harm. The high speed at which it spreads and the magnitude of its influence in the last five to ten years make it a critical challenge. To counter misinformation, it should be the responsibility of the UN and other multilateral organisations to better understand and address modern digital information ecosystems.

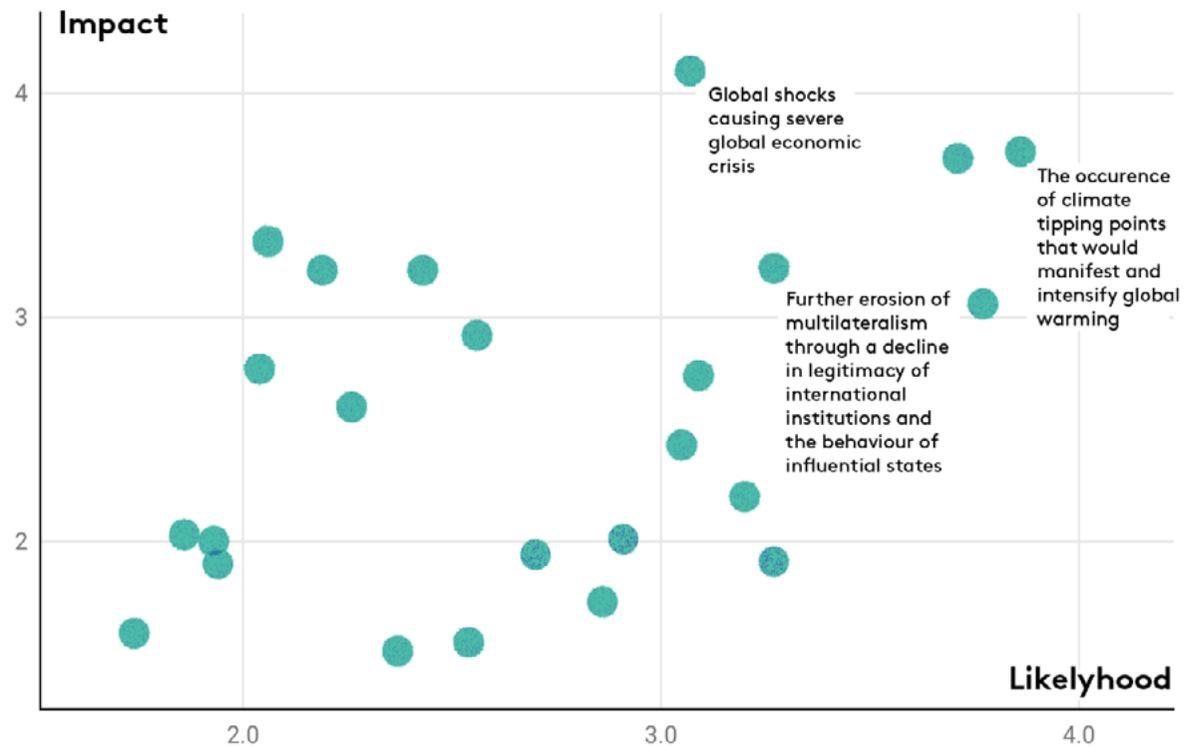
- Creation of a more equitable economic world order (with a focus on trade):

Major economic and geopolitical shifts have fostered tensions in the current global economy, whose structure creates unfair conditions for many states, specifically economically developing ones. Furthermore, the impact of globalisation, climate change and disruptive technologies continues to change the global economic landscape in unprecedented and often imbalanced ways. To create a more equitable world trade order, the UN and other multilateral organisations need to identify pathways to build a more resilient and fairer system of trade.

- Achieving the goals set out in the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030:

The mechanisms built into both sets of climate measures make them too difficult to implement and too slow to be effective. Climate change is understood as a threat multiplier in the challenge of achieving the goals set out in both agendas. To achieve those goals, the UN and other multilateral organisations need to find ways to establish links between the two agendas and to develop more incentives for countries to work towards the goals.

To identify the critical challenges affecting the goals mentioned above, the group first engaged in a horizon scanning exercise to identify many different challenges. Subsequently, the participants assessed all of these challenges in terms of their likelihood and impact. From the likelihood-impact diagram they then selected three challenges that are particularly likely to occur and would have a relatively high impact. In making their choice, the group also considered the impact of certain challenges on others.



II Three critical challenges

We identified the three following critical challenges which need immediate attention and proactive management due to their high **likelihood and potential impact**:

1

1. The occurrence of climate tipping points that would intensify global warming

A “climate tipping point” is an environmental change (even a small one) that, once it crosses a certain threshold, will cause fundamental aspects of our ecosystem and human living conditions to change dramatically and irreversibly.⁴ The tipping point could occur at any moment, whether tomorrow or in a few years, decades or centuries, but the defining characteristic is that once the change has started, it will be virtually impossible to stop. Tipping points can be triggered by natural fluctuations in the climate as well as by human-caused climate change.

2

2. Global shocks triggering a severe global economic crisis

A “global shock triggering a global economic crisis” is a massive change or event, typically outside governments’ immediate control, that would lead to a series of sudden, severe and sustained economic downturns.⁵ Potential shocks include the bursting of a financial bubble, another pandemic, or even a solar storm damaging IT infrastructure.

3

3. The further erosion of multilateralism through a decline in the legitimacy of international institutions and adverse behaviour by influential states

The further erosion of multilateralism will likely be triggered by the continuing violation or marginalisation of international norms and agreements. This erosion will be exacerbated by the argument that major international institutions (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), etc.) are ineffective (e.g. due to stalled negotiations) and not inclusive (especially for poorer countries).⁶

In a brainstorming exercise, the group first collected approximately 40 ideas on how to tackle the three critical challenges. The group then assessed these ideas for strategic policy options in terms of their effectiveness in addressing (avoiding or mitigating) challenges and of the overall preparedness of the UN (and/or other multilateral institutions) to implement them. After selecting the most promising ideas for strategic options, the group then split up into teams to flesh out these options. In order to increase the chances of success, the group conducted a pre-mortem analysis. The purpose of a pre-mortem analysis is to identify and mitigate potential causes of failure.

The group started from the assumption that, five years from now, each policy option will have failed horribly. Subsequently, the group listed the causes of failure in order to then revise each strategic policy option accordingly. In order to generate even more ideas of ways to make the strategic options more comprehensive and more successful, the group also performed an analysis of the potential success factors.



Strategic Policy Options		
Policy options for Challenge #1: The occurrence of climate tipping points that would manifest and intensify global warming	Policy options for Challenge #2: Global economic shocks causing severe global economic crisis	Policy options for Challenge #3: Further erosion of multilateralism through a decline in legitimacy of international institutions and the behaviour of influential states
1 Governments (at national or local government level) can implement carbon pricing systems to create an incentive for companies to reduce polluting behaviors and to invest in cleaner energy choices and low-carbon innovation. [12]	The UN could establish a global coordination and cooperation mechanism to promote joint trade and investment for recovery and reconstruction (e.g. through collaboration and reduction of debts). In this way, nation-states could achieve mutual beneficial profits and support on an international level. [3]	The UN could take the issues and needs of its member states seriously so they don't have to look to China for help. The issue of how to deal with the further proliferation of chinese institutions and the further expansion of the BRI are one of the major risks to a multilateral world. [6]
2 The UN could impose to stop using plastic and other materials that are the biggest source of pollution and to replace them by new material that are clean for the environment. [14]	WTO members from the north should do more to break the impasse at the WTO in order to promote a more equitable global trading order. [8]	The USA and all states interested in a law-based world order should protect the institutions created after 1945, fill them with new life and develop proposals for a multilateral approach to the new challenges, e.g. for controlling the power of Google, Facebook & Co. [10]
3 The UN could regulate the level of pollution worldwide by distributing rights to pollute for any given economic activity. Any source of pollution that is not authorized would pay a heavy fine. [14]	The UN could enforce international regulations for financial markets, especially the sectors that are prone to speculation. In addition a more equal taxation of the upper 1% would help to free funds to distribute.	States could give more power to multilateral institutions (bigger ability to regulate and adopt binding decisions worldwide). [14]
4 The international community could forbid travelling through ways of transportation that pollute and use fossil fuel and only authorize clean transportation. [14]	UN can extinguish themselves to find a new order [13]	Reform the / build a new UN framework
5 The international Community could decide to limit the demographic expansion. [14]	Federal economic bodies should promulgate prudent macroeconomic policies and ensure that industry sectors are not headed towards financial meltdown. [5]	The UN Security Council must adopt a new resolution for a completely new configuration, representation and functioning of the Security Council itself by 2025.
6 Tue UN could align the security with the climate agenda and get a binding mandate to encourage compliance with and enforce the Paris Agreement - through more concrete economic incentives and a more effective framework for financial, technical, and capacity-building support, and through public pressure or sanctions		Strengthening the global integrated multilateral efforts such as more investment in good climate practices and reduction in defence budgets. A comprehensive climate linked policies in agriculture, education, mobility and healthcare would also help mitigate or minimise global shocks. Solidarity and compassion and reduction in nationalism and more comprehensive outlook at grand global challenges. [7]
7 The UN and other multilateral Orgs could increase public awareness of CC and tipping points and push more for action		The UN on the international community could correct/eliminate/monitor global economic shocks by maintaining peace and security worldwide [14]
8 The UN could mobilise unified resources and address one tipping point, such as planting more trees and addressing reduction in greenhouse gases. [7]		The UN and/or its major stakeholder such as the US, the EU and China could draft a new global economic framework to chart the current economic transition and catalyse a fundamental discussion on it.
9 The UN could launch a 10-year project with an ambitious budget to clean-up the oceans. [14]		The UN and/or the G20 could set up a fund and economic stimulus and aid programs to proactively soften the next economic shock
10 The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) could do more to support access to clean energy technologies in developing countries because the costs around renewable energy are one of the key impediments. [8]		The UN (especially the IMF, World Bank) and other multilateral organizations could seriously address inequalities and economic imbalances to reduce them and to reduce the uneven impacts of economic shocks.
		Member States of the WTO should define and put in place governance structures for strategic planning and policy making at the WTO in line with the executive board as envisioned in the Havana Charter for an International Trade Organization to strengthen leadership and direction of WTO. [12]
		The UN could implement severe sanctions that secure the rule of international trade laws rather than "might makes right" to prevent unfair trade deals, especially considering the different values of the world's most powerful economic states, e.g. China, US, Russia, EU. [3]
		States could give more financial resources to supranational organisations in order to act swiftly and efficiently to preserve common goods. [14]
		Policy makers (global, national, local government level) should develop policy interventions that target vulnerable households and smaller firms e.g. waiving social security fees, utility bills, and channeling credit through fintech firms so as to mitigate the impact of this severe shock [12]
		The UN could focus on one specific area like vaccine multilateralism to showcase that multilateralism works is the only way to get out of the pandemic and get all actors on board. Showcasing effectiveness through concrete actions would increase legitimacy.
		The UN could subsidize massively greener technologies and the transition to green economies. [14]
		UN can refer half of their funds to local NGOs to achieve local impact. [13]
		To mitigate the impact of global warming, the UN could set up aid funds that help the most affected countries by securing their food and water supply. In this scenario, the UN could also conduct peace-keeping missions in unstable regions to prevent future food and "water wars" from happening. [3]
		The US Government as a clear commitment of his full support to the Paris Agreement should pledge substantial climate finances in support of the efforts of developing countries, and to publish its new national adaptation plan. [15]
		Universities globally could rethink their engagement with communities and companies in order to achieve a wider better understanding of climate change consequences. [11]

Source: Foresight Intelligence - Created with Databwrapper

III Strategic options to manage these challenges

The next question is, of course, how to manage these challenges. We developed the following strategic options to provide rather concrete ideas for long-term policy projects in order to stimulate the foreign policy strategic discourse:

1. The UN could implement a binding Zero-Emission Mechanism to reduce the chances for tipping points to occur

The UN could further align security with the climate agenda by proposing and implementing a legally binding 'zero-emission' mechanism to encourage compliance, and enforce the Paris Agreement. Aiming at the target of a net-zero world, the mechanism would include more concrete economic incentives and an effective framework for financial, technical, and capacity-building support on the one hand and sanction capabilities for non-compliance on the other hand.

In the short term, the United Nations and other international actors would need to generate more attention and a sense of urgency for international climate policy. For instance, any future Leaders Summit represents an opportunity to highlight the risks of climate tipping points. Leaders or members of the civil society could have referred to or used the risk assessments conducted by the existing Climate Security Mechanism to establish the urgency of this matter.⁸ Eventually, the Leaders Summit could have explicitly called on governments to come together to develop a mechanism for immediate action to mitigate the effects of climate change in order to reduce the risk of climate tipping points from occurring. Motivated countries could have initiated a coalition of the

willing to build a virtual zero-emission mechanism for climate change actions based on current examples and good practices. The mechanism needs to be more representative than a state-by-state mandate but also needs to include the civil society and other international institutions in the dialogue and development of actions. A framework for this zero-emission mechanism could be finalized as early as April 2022, if continued pressure from the public and civil society is applied.

The mechanism could conduct climate risk assessments yearly with inputs from the Climate Security Mechanism. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) would then be tasked to continuously monitor and illustrate the impacts of climate change and especially potential tipping points on security. Such a risk assessment would include risk management strategies which the Zero-Emission Mechanism could pursue in terms of financial and technical cooperation. The implementation of such a mechanism relies on two assumptions





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- The initial coalition of the willing includes the US, China and Russia as well as a number of regional leaders of the world in terms of climate change, including Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, UAE, Chile, France, the UK, Germany, the USA, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Bangladesh, Australia and New Zealand;
- Governments are willing to enter a legally binding agreement that would allow the United Nations Security Council to use sanctions or mechanisms for enforcement/punishment.

In the medium term, the coalition of the willing would need to provide resources for a global fund in order to successfully implement the mechanism's incentive structures and entice other governments to join. The recruitment of additional members could be pursued by a committee within the mechanism. This would become likely more successful as credibility is gained through the successful implementation of transformation projects. More governments are likely to be pushed to join the mechanism, when they are eventually forced to face the consequences of climate change. This will likely happen even sooner as citizens express their discontent. Civil society leaders and businesses could also increasingly participate. The UN would need to be the biggest implementing partners. Sources of education (schools, research institutions, international organizations, etc.) should be informed and used as facilitators by the UN to raise awareness on climate change and the mandate, especially to younger generations.

2. The UN could develop more guidelines and protocols for anti-protectionist measures in the post-covid period to create a more equitable global economic system that is more resistant to shocks

The UN (especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank) and other multilateral organizations could develop guidelines and protocols for anti-protectionist measures for the post-covid recovery period. Regional organizations and agreements could be used as cases to first demonstrate the positive effects of anti-protectionist measures. Following this, the proliferation of 'micro-agreements' based on common interests should be encouraged and supported to further the creation of a more equitable global economic system.

Recent waves of nationalism and protectionist measures coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic continue to highlight the unfairness in the global economic system.⁹ Developing countries have particularly been hit hard by the trade disruptions of the pandemic and protectionist measures. In order to prepare for a strong and inclusive recovery, a more equitable system based on uniting common interests between countries is crucial.

In the short term, the WTO should continue to utilize the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to openly discuss the global inequalities and economic imbalances that existed before and were exacerbated by the pandemic. The WTO needs to lead efforts to develop guidelines for a strong and inclusive recovery for all countries based on clear protocols for anti-protectionist measures in the post-COVID recovery period. A strong and inclusive recovery would first need to include trade policies developed by the WTO and others would outline ways to ensure the distribution of safe, efficient and high-quality vaccines. This would rely heavily on the continued financial support by international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.¹⁰ At the same time, efforts to head off future US and Chinese standoffs should include the support of regional free trade agreements, like that of the African



Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). These regional trade agreements should be presented as a demonstration of the positive effects of anti-protectionist measures.

In the medium term, the success of the proliferation of various micro agreements, like that of bilateral agreements or Economic Partnership Agreements, will allow for the leveraging of "moribund" regional blocs. A successful current example of this is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Regional blocs can then work collaboratively on a more fair and equitable approach based on common interests and strengthen trade policies. They can do so effectively by identifying and addressing supply bottlenecks and regulatory hurdles to better create equitable economic recovery and equal economic opportunities.¹¹ The success of these efforts will draw in more parties to join agreements based on common interests for better cooperation and multilateralism even in the context of ongoing surges in protectionism and nationalism.

3. The UN could establish regional Security Councils to strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of the UN to avoid further erosion of the liberal international order

One could argue that in order to strengthen the liberal international order (which we understand as a set of multilateral institutions with the United Nations at its core), a reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would be the strategic option with the highest potential effectiveness. The UNSC has been questioned as to whether it is fit for its purpose. This is particularly in respect of its inability to agree on Syria and its failure to prevent the annexure of Crimea due to the veto powers by the five permanent members of the UNSC (permanent five or P5).¹² From another perspective, however, one could also argue that the UNSC has been indeed largely successful because so far it prevented large-scale conflicts or even nuclear war between its permanent members. So instead of reforming the UNSC to strengthen the legitimacy of the UN and to avoid further erosion of the liberal international order, we think the UN Secretary-General should bring forward a proposal for the reform of the mandate of the UNSC.

First, the proposal would intend to focus the role of the UNSC as the determiner of the existence of threats to global peace in the context of great power conflict, nuclear proliferation and disarmament. Secondly, security concerns outside of the great power (nuclear) context should be discussed in regional security councils (RSCs).

RSCs are poised to better react to regional security issues and strengthen multilateral cooperation within a region because they would incentivize governments whose security concerns are interlinked to cooperate. Regional actors impacted by security issues, who tended to be marginalized by major global actors beforehand, will be forced to become involved if they want to shape the trajectory of the issue.¹³ It will allow regional security organizations to be able to take more opportunities to explore potential common regional responses to region-wide security threats or challenges. Moreover, regional actors could identify obstacles

for effective regional policy coordination which would then be able to flourish better.

Thirdly, the proposal should include a framework for what constitutes a specific region, and it should identify a set of regional organizations corresponding to each region. A number of regional organizations have already developed explicit and formal mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolutions of security issues and conflicts among its members, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the African Union (AU) and Organization of American States (OAS).¹⁴ The Secretary-General could propose a closer link to the UNSC system.

An existing proposal offers optional responsibilities the regional organizations would need to take on and shows what cooperation with the UNSC would look like.¹⁵ The authors suggest that the regional organizations would be responsible for representing all members that are involved in the region. They would be responsible for reporting the development of security issues to its members and to UNSC. In turn, the UNSC could still provide its recommendations for settlement or enforcement.

For the mandate of the UNSC to reform and to chart an approach to establish regional UN security councils, the Charter of the United Nations must be amended and ratified by at least two-thirds of the member states and all P5. Therefore, this strategic option requires vast diplomatic convincing. However, after careful assessment of the P5 interests in a regionalization of the UNSC system, there is potential to convince the UNSC of the advantages of regional security councils.



IV Conclusion and reflection

This policy brief summarises the results of *our* strategic foresight project. Therefore, we have focused solely on a small set of strategic options in fields where our group had some level of expertise and particular interest. However, in the course of the workshop we discussed many more long-term foreign policy goals and challenges as well as ideas on how to strategically work for a better future. We thus encourage readers to engage in their own strategic foresight.

From our strategic foresight project, we can conclude the following. Firstly, there are options for managing mid-term global challenges strategically, meaning proactively rather than reactively in response to crises—the room for manoeuvre is in fact much larger than we first assumed. Secondly, we expected that in a group process it would be necessary to home in on the lowest common denominator in order to proceed and reach conclusions. However, our systematic strategic foresight process capitalised on group work and led us to think about a wider range of possibilities for managing challenges, enabling us to develop more detailed and more concrete strategic policy options. Thirdly, we want to highlight the usefulness of the pre-mortem analysis. This analysis can easily be integrated into everyday policy planning to counterbalance our urge to neglect information which is unpleasant, even when it is essential for increasing the quality of long-term planning. Fourthly, in summing up our findings, we would like to highlight the role of regions and regional orders in managing global challenges—in trade and economic cooperation, in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, and in international security. The challenges that we described cannot be managed at the domestic level, while the global arena appears to be too far removed. The regional level, however, seems suited to effectively tackling these issues that face humanity in the 21st century.

Endnotes

- 1 The [Global Diplomacy Lab](#) provides a platform for experts from the fields of diplomacy, non-governmental organisations, business, the media and cultural institutions to share knowledge and ideas. Together, these experts look for new and more inclusive approaches to diplomacy by working on specific case studies provided by fellow GDL members.
Disclaimer: The GDL members who participated in the Global Diplomacy Lab did so in their personal capacity. None of the views expressed in this document represent those of the partner institutions or the institutions and organisations for which GDL members work.
- 2 Global Diplomacy Lab expert participants: Virginie Arslan, Hanina Ben Bernou, Stefan Cibian, Firmin Kami Adjahossou, Elizabeth Maloba, Edna Martinez, Patrick Mpedzisi, Diego Osorio, Gaurav Sharma, Eirliani Abdul Rahman, Carl Friedrich Scheid, Philipp Breer and GDL Dean Ruprecht Polenz.
- 3 The workshop was created and facilitated in collaboration with [Foresight Intelligence](#).
- 4 Carbon Brief. (2020, February 10). [Explainer: Nine 'tipping points' that could be triggered by climate change](#).
- 5 Parker, S. (2021, February 17). [Sea of debt](#).
- 6 Benner, T. (2019, November 4). [What's Left of Multilateralism? Putting Six Hypotheses to the Test](#).
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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AfDB	African Development Bank
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
AU	African Union
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreement
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OAS	Organization of American States
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P5	Permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RSC	Regional Security Councils
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WCO	World Customs Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Disclaimer

GDL members participate in their personal capacity in the Global Diplomacy Lab. None of the views expressed in this document represent any of those of the partner institutions or the institutions and organisations for which GDL members work.

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