

The war in the Ukraine, an emerging new world order and what it means for business leaders

This is the plan Vladimir Putin is obsessing over.

On March 24 1999, in a plane high above the Atlantic, Yevgeni Primakov, the Russian Prime Minister, was heading to the United States for an official visit. Halfway into the flight, he learned the combined forces of NATO had started bombing Serbia, a close ally to Russia. Immediately Primakov ordered the pilot to return to Moscow in a manoeuvre dubbed "Primakov's Loop". It was time to activate his plan.

Primakov's plan was to create a multipolar world, aimed as a strong rebuke to the fallacies of a 'romantic western' worldview. The doctrine had two primary points. First, Russia must end its subservient foreign policy guided by the US. Second, the Kremlin must renew old ties with India and strengthen the newly-discovered friendship with China.

Primakov argued that a Russia-India-China (RIC) troika in a multipolar world would enable economic and social fortification for like-minded nationalistic and authoritarian regimes not allied to the West. His vision was prompted by the realisation that Russia could not compete toe-to-toe with a globally dominant United States, and a desire to see more regional power bases established.

Highly probable, high impact yet ignored catalysts of change

None of this is new. Putin's desire to dismantle the West's dominance has long been apparent. But this highly-probable, high-impact grey elephant has largely been ignored – especially by businesses based in the global west and looking to America and Europe as core markets. It can be ignored no longer. Like pandemics, this force of change is now front and centre. The elephant in the room is no longer sitting quietly in the corner.

Last year we introduced our readers and clients to the great grey elephants sharply transforming the world in the 2020s. One of the grey elephants – defined as highly-probable, high-impact yet ignored catalysts of change – is *multipolarity* (you can read more about grey elephants [here](#)).

The questions on business leaders' minds need to be: Is multipolarity inevitable? What does it mean to live in a world that is caught between unipolar and multipolar futures? What is the role of business in shoring up liberal democracy? When and how should our business take a stand on moral, ethical, and political issues? What can we expect from the future? And, how does multipolarity impact our strategy?

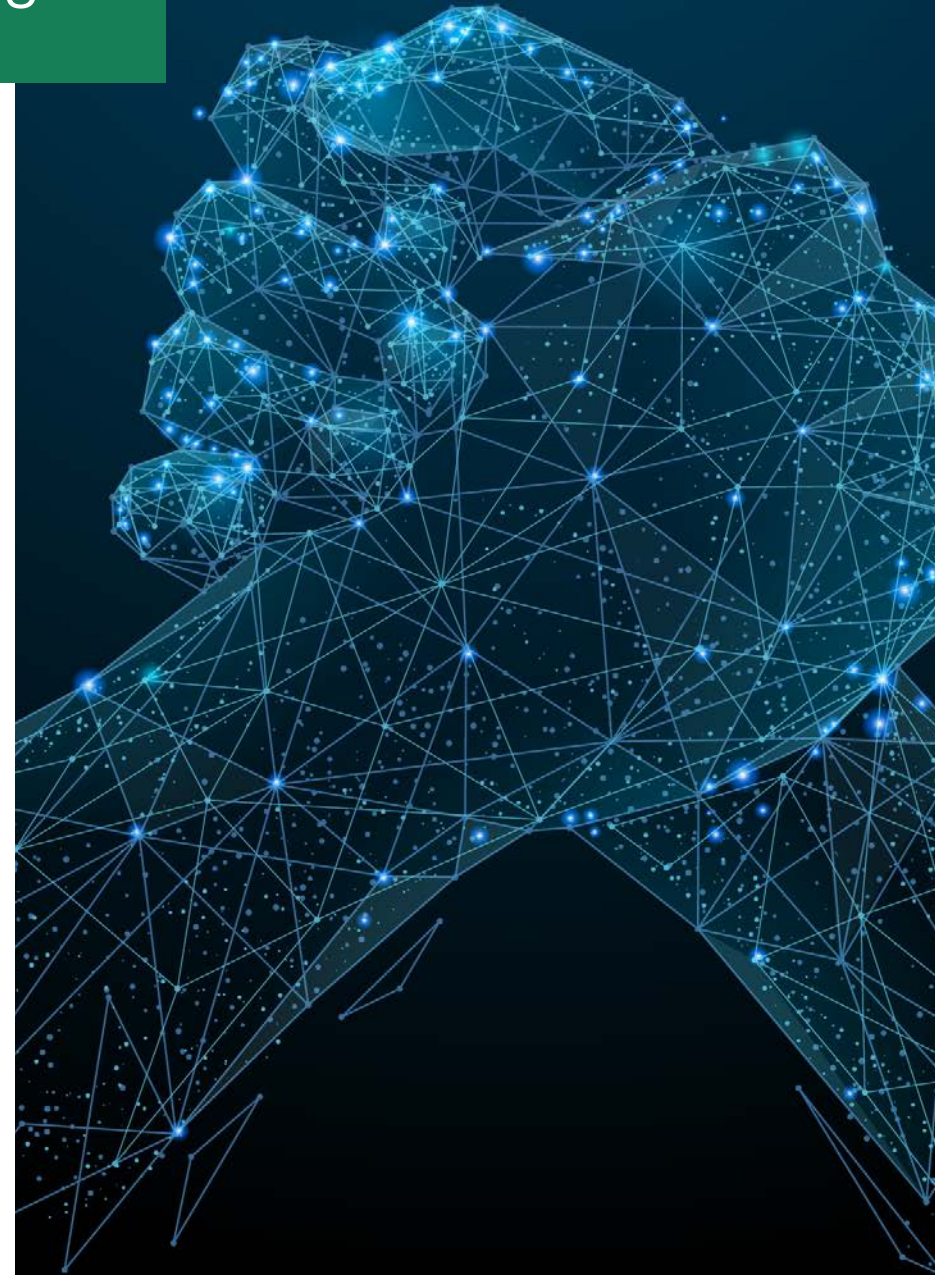


What we can expect – Putin’s playing the long game

Worryingly, Western media is depicting Putin as a rambling madman, acting without logic or reason, and sure to be ousted by a united West. This is a serious miscalculation. Donald Trump is right when he says Putin is “very savvy.” Putin knows exactly what he is doing. He has the confidence of a chess master, the support of his allies, and the opportunistic foresight to see how the grey elephants of change are playing into the hands of Russia’s multipolar agenda.

Putin has been boosted by several shots to the arm over the past five years. Firstly, there was the lacklustre punitive world response to Russia’s annexation

of the Crimean Peninsula. This was followed by Donald Trump’s support of unilateral nationalist policies. There have also been very few consequences for Russia’s ongoing misinformation campaigns, and especially their supposed cyber-interference in American and EU domestic electoral and political processes. Then, there is growing global inequality and the rise of an angry 21st century proletariat, seeking retribution from the global elite, who are seen as greedy and out of touch. All this colliding with a world reeling from the Covid-19 pandemic, has amplified Putin’s ambitions.



What's worrying is Putin's endgame. It is unlikely to only be Ukraine, but also the demise of Western liberal democracy. We doubt he would attack a NATO nation unprovoked, but chemical or tactical nuclear strikes on Ukraine, cyber-attacks, and media misinformation would have a powerful impact in destabilising the world.

Putin may adopt a tactic of prodding and poking until arguing he has been cajoled by the West to expand his

theatre of conflict. Unfortunately, wars are a powerful stimulus to create a new world order – Putin has recognised this. It's a big gamble, but he must believe Russia stands to lose less than the West, should the war escalate or be extended.

Sanctions will not hurt Putin personally or create a desired regime change in the short or medium term. Propaganda will be used to blame the West for the pain the average Russian endures, and

the Russian oligarchs are reasonably well protected (not least by digital currencies). Russia has also built a strong network of illiberal authoritarian regimes, and this network will help to soften sanctions, giving Russia access to the technology and banking systems it needs. Russia, China, Syria, Venezuela, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Nicaragua may have little in common, but they are bound by an intense dislike for liberal democracy and a strong desire to maintain their



own authoritarian power at any cost. India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa, along with a few African countries, would also likely be aligned with an outcome that favours a multipolar world.

This is not going to be resolved quickly. And the current conflict in Ukraine will not be the last sortie in the multipolar battle plan. The 2020s will be a decade of disruption: businesses will need to prepare for the long haul.

What can we do – how this impacts strategy

A lot has changed since the last world war. Businesses today have a huge impact and in many instances their influence in the world can be bigger than governments. Don't imagine that your organisation cannot influence the outcome of wars. It can.

The most successful organisations navigate disruptions, not by predicting the future but by tuning towards change and seizing opportune moments to create the future. There are [numerous ways](#) in which Putin's war may end; some value and comfort can be derived from developing scenario plans, but the powerful approach is to deliver strategies that make a difference in the world.

Our research shows there are five imperatives that businesses can harness in their strategies to thrive in a decade of disruption. These include: (1) being a force for good, (2) building resilient ecosystems, (3) being inclusive and diverse, (4) being bionic, and (5) building a culture of exploration and innovation.

Being a force for good ensures that profits are not generated at the expense of people and planet, but that prosperity and growth is for all stakeholders. Delivering on diversity and inclusivity makes the world a better place and ensures people are valued, which in turn minimises the grey elephant of angry people. Embracing ecosystems ensures

bigger problems can be tackled, resilience to shocks is increased, and more impact is delivered. Being bionic ensures that people are front and centre in using new breakthrough technologies like AI. Creating a culture of exploration and innovation ensures we have the cultures that can find solutions in a world that is struggling.

By better understanding the impact of grey elephants, leaders can create the future. Multipolarity, pandemics, global warming, and more – these are all highly probable but ignored catalysts and forces of change. We can no longer ignore them. The 2020s will be a pivotal decade and an outcome will be the emergence of a new geopolitical and economic system. This system is not predetermined, and businesses have an important role in shaping and creating the system that evolves.

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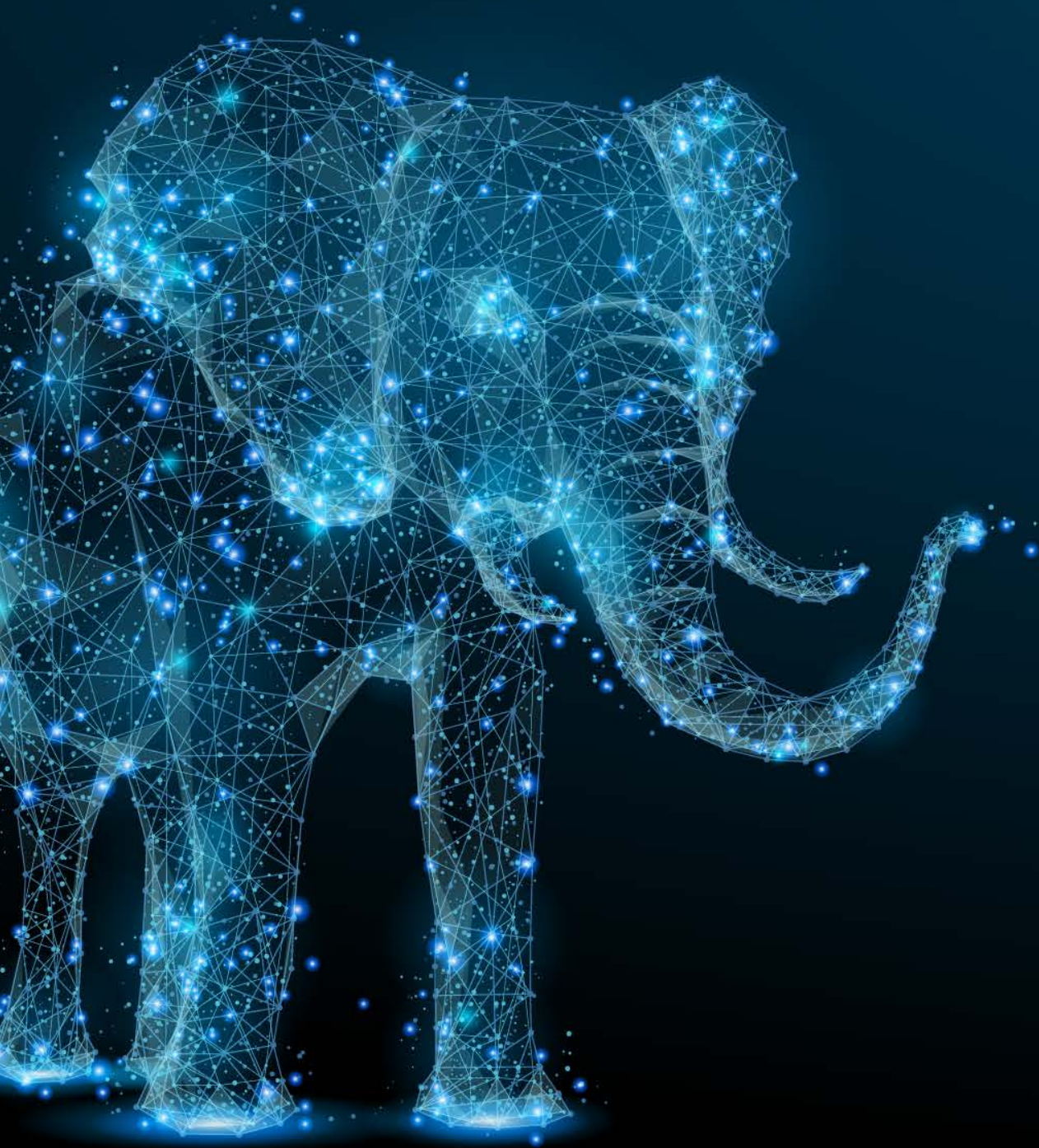
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TTC Sparks:

Insights into great grey elephants
sharply transforming the world

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