

# Beginning of the end of the pandemic? 5 essential flags to watch

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*Will we be better prepared for the next pandemic? Will we see another conflict on the level of World War Three? This article breaks down essential flags to watch which indicate how the external world may evolve in 2022.*

Reflecting on the times we live in, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, had this to say in his 2021 Christmas sermon: "We all face uncertainty, uncontrollability and unpredictability, from huge companies to those sleeping rough."

That is one of the principal themes of the book *Thinking the Future*, co-authored by Mitch Ilbury and myself and published by Penguin Random House in July last year.

In response to the challenge posed by these factors, we offer the following advice in the book: "The essence of thinking the future is to understand the pattern of forces propelling the present into the future and to see where those forces can lead." In other words, don't try to forecast what is unforecastable. Rather identify the forces changing the game, paint different narratives or scenarios of how the game can play out, pick the best flags to watch and weigh up the probabilities of the various outcomes as the future unfolds. That is as good as it gets.

As for uncontrollability, we devote a whole chapter to the Stoic philosophers in Ancient Greece who distinguished between what lies beyond your control and what lies within it. One of them, named Epictetus, said:

"Where do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own."



Stoics believe that you can improve the chances of a promising future by concentrating on your own range of options, but only once you have surveyed the alterations taking place in your immediate surroundings.

Given this introduction, what are the essential flags to watch which indicate how the external world may evolve in 2022? Here is my list of five flags so that you can assess their potential impact on the journey that lies ahead of you and those around you.

Equally, you may wish to be an activist by making your own individual contribution to improve the odds of an exemplary scenario materialising in the world at large while lowering the odds of a bad one. Social media, together with the momentum one person can create through it, provide an overlap between the circles inside and beyond your control. You can magnify your influence many times by innovative communication that exploits the overlap.

## The red flag

China and Russia, in different ways, are on a collision course with the United States. Despite China's incredible economic success in the last forty years, its current rulers appear to be reverting to some of the chief tenets of old-fashioned communism. At the same time, they still wish to reclaim Taiwan, whereas the Americans want the island to retain its independence.

On the other hand, President Putin bemoans the dismantling of the former Soviet Union as an unpardonable error and views the threat of Ukraine joining NATO as totally unacceptable - just as Americans perceived Russia planting missiles in Cuba in 1962 as crossing a red line. He has assembled plenty of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border to indicate his displeasure and send a message to the West that the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 by Russia could - if circumstances warranted it - now be supplemented by the invasion of Ukraine itself.

Coincidentally, the US is more divided than ever since the American Civil War. Democrats and Republicans barely cooperate with one another; the role of the previous President in the mob's invasion of Capitol Hill in January last year is under investigation as we speak; and America's recent chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan has dented its image of being the dominant power on the block.

So, there are two scenarios. The first is that modern communications technology and intense diplomacy ensure that none of these three nations accidentally stumble into military conflict. Jaw-jaw with all its ambiguity wins over war-war. It worked in 1962. Maybe it will work again. The second scenario is the reverse of what happened in the early part of the last century: instead of World War One followed by the Spanish flu, we have COVID-19 followed by World War Three. It may go down in the records - if any are still kept - as the final war between democracy and autocracy.

Many would argue that the principle of mutually assured destruction inherent in the ownership and use of nuclear weapons rules out the second scenario. Against this, as David Hume – the Scottish philosophical giant of the 18th century who is featured in our book – observed: "Reason is the slave of passion." Emotion can trump logic in the heat of the moment, where deep conflicts of interest and culture are involved. Blind fury is something we have all felt on occasions. The greater the proliferation of nuclear weapons – North Korea has them and Iran may follow suit – the more Hume's words resonate when evaluating global risks.

## The green flag

With nearly eight billion members of the human species alive today, the two most significant issues facing the planet are climate change and the ongoing diminution in and extinction of many types of flora and fauna. It makes this century unique in that at no previous stage in the history of humankind have we ourselves – through sheer numbers - posed an existential threat to the sustainability and diversity of our own world.

Changing how we live and what we aspire to in material and spiritual terms is probably the biggest challenge of all because it goes against our basic DNA. We have never had to make sacrifices before to preserve the environment. For, example, will we really slow down incursions into the natural habitat by curbing the development of new cities, roads and infrastructure and halting the conversion of tropical forests into agricultural land? That is what economic growth, still the main ambition of any country you wish to choose, is all about.

The familiar riposte of politicians is that there is no either/or dichotomy in debating the topic under review, and you can satisfy economic and environmental goals at the same time. Going green is all about grabbing opportunities as opposed to countering threats. Politicians would say that, wouldn't they? It remains to be seen whether they are correct or, in the words of Greta Thunberg, it is merely blah, blah, blah.

The best-case scenario in *Thinking the Future* we call 'Paradise Regained' where, against all expectations, nations come together to share new technologies to make renewable energy cheaper than energy derived from fossil fuels. An additional requirement is that every link in the chain of producing and operating the new devices – from the cradle to the grave - is examined to minimise the environmental impact. For example, nobody has yet worked out how to mine and recycle lithium on the scale required for the new generation of batteries. It is a tricky affair. Besides all this, rich nations will have to make substantial grants to poor nations to assist in funding the costly transition to a green economy.

The worst-case scenario is 'Pandemonium', where billions of immigrants try to move from countries made uninhabitable by extreme weather conditions to countries that are still relatively unaffected. In the end, borders of the more fortunate nations become porous as they can no

longer be fully protected against overwhelming numbers wishing to breach them.

Most important of all in determining which scenario emerges is for each of us to ask the following introspective question: how am I going to modify my own behaviour to lower the carbon footprint attributable to me personally? Change begins at home.

## The pandemic flag

This is the global flag we are all watching at present since no other flag has triggered so much disruption in modern times. Two scenarios are in play following the arrival of the Omicron variant, which appears to be more infectious but milder than its predecessors. The first scenario is that Omicron signals the beginning of the end of the pandemic because it will eventually create herd immunity around the world. Given the vaccines' impact, the administration of which may become a permanent feature of our lives like flu jabs, the coronavirus never again causes the level of death and havoc it did initially.

The second more negative scenario is that, like Omicron, another variant comes out of the blue, putting the world on tenterhooks. Experts are not dismissing the second scenario at this stage as there have been too many surprises in the last two years to discount any possibility. Another scenario is that a completely different virus comes from nowhere to turn the world upside down again. After all, there is no set period between plagues.

However, we may be better prepared for the next pandemic as governments learn to walk the tightrope between lives and livelihoods more effectively. In the meantime, we are beginning to see certain permanent changes in lifestyle such as a hybrid version of working from home and going to the office. Schools are also growing accustomed to distance education where teachers give online lessons. Social distancing and wearing a mask may not be so challenging to do the second time around.

## The inequality flag

This flag logically follows the last one, as the pandemic has made the world an even more unequal place than it was before it started. The easy money, injected into economies by governments worldwide as relief measures, has somehow found its way into stock markets and property, which are now at record levels. Hence, the super-rich are now much more affluent than they were in 2019, while the middle class and poor are battling to restore their lives.

Similarly, despite being given some form of pandemic relief, many small businesses on the high street and elsewhere have had to close and many big businesses in industries like tourism and travel are still under enormous pressure. Until regulations on self-isolation and other restrictions are lifted, economic disruption and misery will remain acute. Meanwhile, living costs are accelerating as higher price inflation across a broad range of products and services takes its toll.

This has created widespread anger among ordinary people, which may alter the general social and political dynamic in the years ahead. An anti-establishment feeling is growing and being fuelled by the internet.

Higher inflation could also cause interest rates to rise, making it harder for governments, companies, and the public to service their debt. Nevertheless, the downside scenario of another financial crash like 2008, or worse still a repetition of the Great Depression of the 1930s, is something central banks have in mind and are seeking to avoid at all costs. Indeed, the ultimate desire of all investors and bankers is to wind the clock back one hundred years when the Roaring Twenties, Cloche hats and the Charleston made the Spanish flu a distant memory in the blink of an eye.

Fast-forwarding to 2022, the dominant issue now coming to the fore is how the free enterprise system can be tweaked to achieve a fairer outcome without in any way deflating the entrepreneurial spirit. The inequality flag is rising up the pole and fluttering in the breeze. Governments beware!

## The crowded space flag

In *Thinking the Future*, Mitch and I have this to say: "At present, there is only one law governing outer space: the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. With all the activity now taking place in space, more laws will no doubt be in the offing, particularly since private companies are now starting to argue about their share of space. The flag also pinpoints our dependence on satellite systems to communicate with one another. What would happen if the internet went down worldwide because two satellites crashed, and the resulting debris caused widespread damage to crucial components of our international communication network?"

Think of all the industries so crucial to our daily living which would be affected by a collision scenario in space. Since publication of the book, there have been several close encounters and the Chinese have raised the issue with the UN; but no action has been taken. In addition, short private flights into space just beyond the Earth's atmosphere and back have begun and will soon become a popular pastime for the ultra-rich. Who does space really belong to? It cannot be the privileged few, but it cannot have too many owner-occupants either.

There may well be other flags that you as a reader feel are important to watch in your own life or as possible game-changers in your country or the world as a whole. Be a fox and add them to the list. Play scenarios around them and if one rises in probability, amend your plan of action accordingly.

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