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*A car approaches the Peace Arch border crossing into the U.S., Blaine, Wash., June 8, 2021 (AP photo by Elaine Thompson).*

## Making Sense of a Year of Contradictions

Judah Grunstein Friday, Dec. 17, 2021

In trying to take stock of 2021, it's hard to draw definitive conclusions, given all the seemingly contradictory trends on display over the past 12 months. The year began with the almost miraculous rollout of coronavirus vaccines, less than a year after the onset of the global pandemic that upended life across the planet. But it ends with huge disparities in access to those vaccines among nations and regions, and a small but significant proportion of people rejecting them even in the wealthy countries that do have easy access to them.

Though it opened with scenes of shocking violence in the U.S. Capitol, the year also ushered in the inauguration of a U.S. president whose more conventional approach to U.S. foreign policy promised to shore up multilateralism and the international order. But it ends with an ongoing civil war in Ethiopia and a brewing one in Myanmar, and the threat of interstate war in Europe on a scale not seen since World War II.

On democracy and human rights, too, the year's developments were just as dispiriting, with a series of military coups in Guinea, Mali, Sudan and Myanmar; a presidential coup in Tunisia; sham elections in Nicaragua; and ongoing democratic backsliding in El Salvador, Poland, Hungary and the United States. And it draws to a close with a Summit for Democracy that, for all its symbolic value, rang hollow in terms of its practical impact, as if to underscore the challenges facing liberalism and pluralistic societies across the world.

Meanwhile, the climate crisis seemed to take on added urgency this year, increasingly visible in extreme weather events and dramatic warnings from scientists studying climate patterns. Yet despite major declarative advances, in practice, we still march on toward a known tipping point after which there will be no turning back.

To be sure, there were also encouraging developments this year. In the Middle East, for instance, the cycle of all-out confrontation and proxy conflict that characterized the preceding decade has given way to a period of diplomatic engagement. Though that engagement is halting and fragile, and in many ways potentially illusory, it could open pathways to making the region less volatile.

And while defenders of democracy suffered many defeats this year, they remained undeterred, rolling back the

coup in Sudan and remaining defiant in Myanmar and Hong Kong. Similarly, those seeking accountability for past abuses under authoritarian regimes made progress, albeit halting, in Gambia and Burkina Faso.

Yet it's hard to avoid the conclusion that, on any number of measures, whatever hopes we might have held out for 2021—as a year when we could turn the corner on the pandemic, on climate diplomacy, on the subordination of multilateral cooperation to geopolitical competition—were disappointed. Instead of a turning point where the alarming trends of the preceding five years were reversed, the past year seemed more like a moment of fluctuation, where those trends wavered, perhaps, only to reconsolidate and regain momentum.

What is taking shape is a world where closure rather than openness has become the default setting, a state of mind shaping reactions to everything from migration and trade to political dissent and the cross-cultural exchange of ideas. As alarmingly, this closure is also increasingly expressed within the polities of established democracies, in the form of siloed news and information ecosystems that preclude the kind of political dialogue across partisan boundaries on which any democracy depends.

Accompanying this closure, like a stowaway, is a propensity to frame everything in the language of war. The “gray zone” in which nations now conduct their

“politics by other means” has grown so broad as to encompass almost all our social, political and economic activities. And conflict has been bred in so many different hybrid varieties that it is now an invasive species that has taken over the ecosystem of human behavior.

As discouraging as this all may be, however, in many ways it is part of the normal pendulum swings of human history, in which periods of expansive, outward-focused, internationalism alternate with the impulse to contract, turn inward and latch on to more exclusive identities. And in fairness, politics is by its nature conflictual, with very few actual cases of perfectly win-win scenarios, whether on the national or international level. Far more often, there are winners and losers for every decision taken, and mitigating the disparity in outcomes caused by those decisions is the mark of good policy.

When those disparities create tensions that can no longer be mitigated, or if poorly crafted policy simply fails to try, the pendulum begins to reverse its path—slowly at first, then more rapidly, until things begin to unravel seemingly all at once.

It is easy to feel as if we are on the cusp of just such an all-at-once moment. But pessimism, just like optimism, is ahistorical. Though perhaps based on conclusions about the observable present, it is a projection onto an unknowable future. It is possible the trends of the past

year will continue to consolidate, ushering in a period of darkness similar to those of the past century that we thought we had definitively put behind us. But it is not inevitable.

Moreover, even if the pendulum continues to swing toward more closure, more fractured polities and more conflict within and between nations, eventually that process, too, will create the tensions necessary to reverse it. In other words, history, like the calendar year, does not stop when we reach the end of a cycle. But neither does it unfold all by itself. Those who would seek to change its course must engage with it, actively.

What, then, does that mean for those of us who see in the current trajectory a dead end or worse? The answer, I believe, lies not only in finding practical ways to fairly distribute the benefits of openness and pluralism, but also in articulating a common narrative that once again champions those values in ways that inspire action.

It is easy, with hindsight, to dismiss the utopic narratives that accompanied the golden age of globalization in the first decade of this century. Nevertheless, the benefits that accrued from globalization, though unevenly distributed, were real. It would not do, now, to try to resuscitate the maximalist visions of a post-national, cooperative and liberal global polity, as it has lost its power to inspire, given everything that has happened

since. But there is still a constituency, within nations and among them, for openness, cooperation and exchange. Telling the right story can help that constituency take shape—and take action.

As we enter the New Year, we at WPR will continue to bring you all the important trends and developments to help you make sense of the world. As we do, we'll be keeping an eye out for the seeds of that new narrative. I expect we'll find them in the courage and resilience of those who, in the face of long odds, continue to strive and fight for the values that may now seem endangered, but can never be extinguished.

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