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Review Article

MANKIND AT THE TURNING POINT: SCENARIOS FOR THE WORLD'S ECONOMIC FUTURE AMID GEOPOLITICS AND TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract: *The future of the global economy is largely shaped by geopolitical and technological circumstances. The geopolitical context refers to the stability, predictability, and rules-based nature of the global order, while the technological landscape encompasses the speed and scope of adopting new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and autonomous systems that combine sensors, AI, and automation to perform tasks without direct human intervention. This paper explores possible scenarios for the world's economic future in light of anticipated geopolitical and technological changes. The aim of the research is to examine alternative global economic trajectories for the future, with focus on the scenarios developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF), which have the potential to reshape various economic sectors and transform the operations of individual enterprises. To achieve this, the paper employs both analysis and comparison methods applied to selected global economic development scenarios as its primary methodological approach. The main hypothesis is that a systematic understanding of expected global economic trends significantly reduces strategic uncertainty and enables timely adaptation of economic actors by identifying specific risks and opportunities within different scenarios. The analysis evaluates future global economic performance and identifies strategic guidelines necessary to address the anticipated changes.*

Key words*: geopolitics, global economy, technology, artificial intelligence, scenarios of global economic development, strategic uncertainty*

JEL classification*: O110, O33, F5*

1. INTRODUCTION

Building on the tradition of systemically assessing global challenges, this paper recognizes that humanity, half a century after the The Second Report to the Club of Rome authored by Mesarović and Pestel (1974), once again finds itself at a historical crossroads. The authors argued that the rapid succession of crises affecting the entire world represents one of the clearest indicators that humanity is at a turning point in its historical evolution (Mesarović and Pestel, 1974). From a contemporary perspective, a series of interconnected global disruptions - ranging from financial and energy-related to health and geopolitical, reaffirms the relevance of this diagnosis. Just as in the mid-1970s, the global system today faces an accumulation of challenges suggesting that humanity stands at a new developmental crossroads.

In this regard, a parallel can be drawn, from the standpoint of geopolitics and technology, between the global situation of 1974 and the present day. At the time the report was written, the international order was unstable and fragmented, marked by

geopolitical rivalry between East and West in the context of the Cold War. Geopolitical tensions continue to play an important role in shaping international relations today, particularly within the strategic competition of great powers (U.S. - China, NATO - Russia). Humanity again confronts the challenge of coordination and maintaining stability, similar to the situation in 1974. Although the circumstances and actors differ, the essential problem - how to align the interests of diverse countries to ensure global security and sustainable development, remains unchanged. Regarding technology, the earlier period was characterized by the rapid development of industrial and nuclear technologies, which offered the potential for major transformation but also posed significant risks. The modern world is defined by accelerated technological progress in areas such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and biotechnology, which has become a key driver of the transformation of economic and social systems, as well as a source of new risks. As before, technology can serve as a catalyst for progress or destabilization, depending on regulation and policy choices. When Mesarović and Pestel (1974) authored the Second Report to the Club of Rome, geopolitics was rooted in the control of physical resources and territories, while technology mainly functioned as a tool for their exploitation and the preservation of power. Today, global power increasingly depends on technology and data, and geopolitics is shifting toward digital dominance and the control of technological supply chains. In both periods, humanity has found itself at a crossroads, facing critical choices that determine global stability and the prospects for sustainable growth and development of the world economy.

In the context of contemporary understandings of economic growth and development, it is worth noting that Mesarović and Pestel (1974) advocate the concept of "organic growth" as opposed to "undifferentiated growth". Organic growth refers to the harmonious, differentiated, and coordinated development of the world system, in which economic, social, and environmental processes are mutually balanced, bringing it conceptually closer to the modern idea of high-quality, sustainable growth and development (B. Jovanović Gavrilović, Gligorić Matić, and V. Jovanović Gavrilović, 2024). The authors conclude that the world system requires an internal code or plan for its organic growth, using as an analogy a chromosomal message that guides the survival of every living organism.

Drawing from the analogy with the chromosomal code, it becomes clear that organic growth is not a byproduct of spontaneous market forces but the outcome of consciously designed systemic coordination. In this context, contemporary challenges - from geopolitical fragmentation to technological singularity, require a redefinition of the global "blueprint". Without such guidance, technological progress remains confined to the logic of undifferentiated growth that depletes planetary resources, rather than serving as a catalyst for sustainable growth and advances in human well-being.

The focus of this paper is on scenarios of the world's economic future, which is critically shaped by a new matrix of geopolitical and technological factors. While the geopolitical context determines the stability and predictability of the international order, the technological imperative - embodied in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, autonomous systems, and biotechnology, redefines the boundaries of productivity and the nature of human work. *The aim of the research* is to examine alternative global economic trajectories for the future, which have the potential to reshape various economic sectors and transform business operations in light of the interaction between power and innovation. *The central hypothesis* is that a systematic understanding of expected global economic trends significantly reduces strategic uncertainty and enables timely adaptation of economic actors by identifying specific risks and opportunities within different scenarios.

The paper is structured into four sections. Section 2 is devoted to the methodology used in this research. Section 3 presents and discusses the obtained results. Section 4 summarizes the main conclusions of the study and outlines directions for future research.

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary methodological approach employed in this paper is the analysis and comparison of global economic development scenarios up to the year 2030, as defined by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025). The scenarios were constructed based on the anticipation of key future trends, with significant contributions from leading WEF experts and business leaders across various sectors, whose insights were used to identify relevant driving forces as well as to interpret and validate the scenarios.

The analysis focuses on the interaction of two key driving forces - geopolitics and technology, and on their potential trajectories, which may shape the global economy over the next five years. According to the WEF, the rapid advancement of modern technologies opens new opportunities for growth but also introduces new risks; their adoption and the accompanying disruptions further increase uncertainty regarding the future of the

world economy. At the same time, the weakening of global networks, the rise of economic nationalism, and growing political polarization in many countries cast doubt on the stability of the existing international economic order (WEF, 2025).

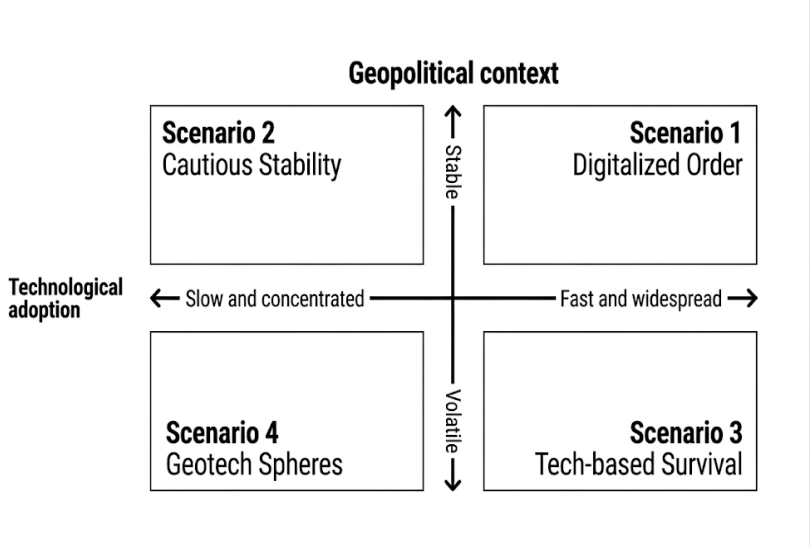
The WEF methodology does not view geopolitical and technological factors in isolation but emphasizes their interdependence. The scenarios of future global economic development are generated precisely by intersecting these dimensions. The geopolitical context includes two possible outcomes - geopolitical stabilization and geopolitical volatility, while technology adoption ranges from slow and concentrated to rapid and widespread. By combining these dimensions, a 2x2 analytical matrix is formed, from which four alternative, mutually consistent future scenarios emerge. These scenarios will be examined in more detail in the following section of the paper.

It is important to note that the proposed scenarios are not predictive in nature; rather, they serve as an analytical framework for understanding potential future states, identifying risks and opportunities, and supporting strategic decision-making under conditions of heightened uncertainty.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four alternative scenarios for the development of the global economy up to 2030, emerging from the interaction of geopolitical and technological factors, are presented in Picture 1.

Picture 1. Four Scenarios of the Global Economy 2030



Source: Adapted from the WEF (2025)

Scenario 1: *Digitalized Order* assumes geopolitical stability accompanied by rapid and widespread adoption of technologies.

In this scenario, a strategic agreement between the US and China prevents further escalation of trade wars. The contours of a new global order become clearer, and global military spending remains stable through 2030.

Although trade barriers have only been partially removed compared to their peak in 2025, the rapid adoption and widespread access to new technologies are driving global GDP growth, which is expected to exceed 4% by 2030 (the reference economic growth rate, according to the International Monetary Fund [IMF], is 3.2%; see IMF, 2025). Inflation has generally remained under control in advanced economies, but the risk of price shocks in emerging markets remains high. Commodity trade has stabilized, while digital services continue their exponential growth. The rapid commercialization of artificial intelligence and new technologies, as the dominant trend over the next five years, accelerates their diffusion. Digital ecosystems are being modernized, accompanied by increasing global foreign investment in the digital economy.

The world's economic geography is gradually adjusting to the changing geopolitical circumstances. Countries are seeking a new model of strategic openness, aiming to remain integrated into global flows while simultaneously mitigating risks through partial localization of activities and diversification of partnerships across a broader range of actors.

Under the influence of new technologies, structural disruptions in the labor market occur, accompanied by widening income inequalities. Countries that

have successfully reformed their education and reskilling systems to develop digital skills and supported human-centered jobs demonstrate greater resilience.

Energy markets have remained stable and focused on renewable sources to address environmental challenges. However, inadequate access to critical raw materials, such as lithium, poses a risk of slowing down the decarbonization process.

Domestic politics remain polarized over the future of globalization and technology, their impact on privacy, labor markets, and ethics, as well as issues of inequality and cultural differences. Radical movements are gaining strength, while misinformation undermines trust in institutions. Countries that have timely recognized and managed these risks have succeeded in preserving social trust and their development prospects.

Geopolitical stability and technological expansion enable a shift toward long-term development planning. Corporate competitiveness now primarily depends on digital infrastructure, the speed of innovation, data management, and talent acquisition.

Scenario 2: ***Cautious Stability*** *is characterized by geopolitical stability, and the slow and concentrated adoption of technologies.*

This scenario assumes a stabilization of tensions between the United States and China, along with a de-escalation of major conflicts, resulting in lower risk premiums and a halt to further increases in trade barriers. The slower pace of technological progress has reduced the intensity of strategic rivalry between the leading blocs in the fields of innovation and technological development.

The limited penetration of advanced technologies across certain sectors and leading firms has resulted in somewhat slower global economic growth (2–3%) compared to the baseline. Inflation has stabilized, but markets have remained volatile due to the bursting of "technology bubbles" driven by overly optimistic expectations.

Global trade has gradually stabilized following earlier disruptions, with trade barriers remaining at levels higher than those seen in the early 2020s. At the same time, the growth of digital services and cross-border data flows remains moderate, reflecting a more cautious approach to global integration. The commercialization of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies is progressing more slowly than expected, limiting their broader diffusion. Digital ecosystems are developing unevenly, with fragmented growth and a more restricted inflow of foreign investment into the digital economy.

The economic geography of the world is gradually adjusting to the new structure of global trade. While some countries are experiencing short-term growth in medium-technology manufacturing, others are facing challenges in transitioning to new models of value chains and supply networks.

Labor-market pressures are lower than expected due to the slow and selective adoption of new technologies. The labor market remains segmented, with persistent wage inequalities favoring highly skilled workers concentrated in a small number of global hubs.

Energy and commodity markets have remained stable, but the global energy system has not undergone a significant transformation. Although there is interest in renewable sources, their share remains limited, while the slow development of new energy-generation technologies (such as small modular reactors) hampers the modernization of the sector.

The formation of new geoeconomic blocs is accompanied by a gradual stabilization of domestic political conditions in many countries. Nevertheless, social discontent continues to simmer due to limited economic opportunities and the digital divide. As the adoption of advanced technologies in the economy progresses slowly, governments are reducing efforts aimed at their development and implementation.

The global business environment is characterized by a concentration of technological progress within a small number of leading firms. Many enterprises face reduced balance-sheet flexibility due to inefficient capital investments, while governments, by withdrawing from direct economic involvement, attempt to stimulate a new cycle of growth.

Scenario 3: ***Tech-based Survival*** *is defined by geopolitical volatility and the rapid, widespread adoption of technologies.*

In this scenario, geopolitical instability is combined with significant technological opportunities in a fragmented world. The environment is dynamic, full of new opportunities but also marked by pronounced risks. The technological race has intensified, and mistrust among opposing parties is highly pronounced.

Global economic growth is influenced by two opposing forces: the positive impact of technological progress on accelerating economic dynamics is offset by the negative effects stemming from bloc fragmentation. Geopolitical instability is accompanied by substantial military and technological expenditures, raising questions about fiscal sustainability.

Trade and investment barriers are deepening under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation, leading to shorter supply chains and their restructuring through regionalization and capacity duplication to enhance resilience against external shocks.

The labor market is exposed to significant disruptions due to accelerated automation and the restructuring of global value chains. These processes exacerbate the skills gap and limit international labor mobility, while declining investment further undermines the economic stability of developing countries.

The global energy market is characterized by rising prices and resource nationalism, with access to critical raw materials being used as a tool of geopolitical leverage. Although green technologies are advancing, they fail to fully offset the massive electricity demand driven by the development of artificial intelligence, exacerbating energy insecurity.

Geopolitical instability and technological misinformation deepen political tensions and internal societal divisions. The resilience of national economies to these shocks depends directly on prior investments in digital ecosystems, talent development, and social protection systems.

Contemporary business strategies prioritize security and the digital reconfiguration of operational models to absorb ongoing geopolitical shocks. While digitalization and AI provide a competitive advantage, they deepen the gap between large corporations with strong financial reserves and smaller entities that struggle to keep pace with the technological race.

Scenario 4: ***Geotech Spheres*** *is shaped by geopolitical instability and slow, concentrated technology adoption.*

In this scenario, the escalation of geopolitical tensions and technological protectionism leads to deep fragmentation of global capital and knowledge flows, accompanied by an erosion of societal trust in innovation. This trajectory has resulted in a high concentration of power in a small number of large corporations, while economic stagnation and the digital divide have hindered the broader adoption of artificial intelligence and automation across the rest of the economy.

High macroeconomic volatility, stemming from the dominance of geopolitical security concerns over economic stability, has led to double-digit inflation and an increased risk of a global recession. The sharp rise in public debt and the surge in debt-servicing costs have created unsustainable fiscal pressures on both advanced economies and developing countries by 2030.

A spiral of increasingly restrictive protectionist measures and discriminatory regulations has caused a continuous decline in global trade volumes. As a result of successive geopolitical crises, global supply chains have become shorter, more politicized, and more rigid, forcing companies to seek stability exclusively within closed geoeconomic blocs.

Localization of supply chains and restrictions on the international mobility of talent have created a labor market shortage, temporarily strengthening workers' bargaining power and driving up nominal wages. However, the slower adoption of automation and a high inflation rate have neutralized these gains, leaving the population's real purchasing power without significant progress.

Frequent geopolitical crises and resource nationalism have fueled extreme volatility in energy markets, keeping oil prices elevated and destabilizing production across many sectors. At the same time, supply chain bottlenecks and unequal access to clean technologies have further deepened the global gap in implementing the energy transition.

Growing international instability has contributed to the rise of radical nationalist governments, whose budget reallocations toward the defense sector have deepened social tensions and undermined public services such as healthcare and education. In an environment of broad economic stagnation, state protectionism has generated isolated growth only in strategic sectors, further intensifying internal social and economic polarization.

The militarization of the economy and selective state interventionism have created a dual business environment in which large corporations, through digital sovereignty policies, have managed to monopolize technological innovation and government subsidies. In contrast, small and medium-sized enterprises outside strategic sectors face systemic marginalization due to eroding competitiveness, restricted access to capital, and a widening technological gap.

A comparison of the analyzed scenarios along two characteristic axes—the stability axis and the technological diffusion axis, separately and simultaneously - leads to several important conclusions.

a) Comparison of the scenarios along the geopolitical stability axis (the vertical axis in Picture 1)

This axis determines the level of predictability and trust in international relations.

It becomes evident that, in the case of the *stable pole* (Scenarios 1 and 2), the paradigm of cooperative globalization prevails. The focus is on strengthening multilateral institutions, harmonizing regulations, and halting the rise of trade barriers. Economic growth is viewed as a "positive-sum game" (win-win), where stability enables long-term investment planning.

In contrast, at the *volatile pole* (Scenarios 3 and 4), the paradigm of fragmentation and "closed doors" dominates. Geopolitical interests outweigh economic ones. The world divides into antagonistic blocs, and the economy becomes a tool of coercion. Supply chains turn into instruments of power, leading to deglobalization and systemic uncertainty.

b) Comparison of scenarios along the technological diffusion axis (horizontal axis in Picture 1)

This axis determines who benefits from the Fourth Industrial Revolution and how innovations are disseminated.

Under conditions of rapid and widespread diffusion (Scenarios 1 and 3), technology acts as a great equalizer. Innovations (such as AI and automation) quickly penetrate all sectors and levels of enterprise. In Scenario 1, this leads to general prosperity, whereas in Scenario 3 it takes the form of a technological arms race, yet still with high productivity.

Slow and concentrated diffusion (Scenarios 2 and 4) causes technology to become an exclusive tool of power. In Scenario 2, the concentration occurs "softer" - due to the slow pace of innovation and limited investments, technological advantages remain with a small number of leading companies and hubs, while the rest of the economy progresses only gradually. In Scenario 4, high entry costs, talent shortages, and state protectionism create "winner-takes-all" dynamics. Innovations are locked within military complexes and a few megacorporations, while the rest of the economy experiences technological stagnation.

c) Comparison of scenarios along both axes simultaneously: Identifying developmental extremes

Although each of the four scenarios provides specific insights into possible futures, the ultimate extent of global prosperity by 2030 is primarily defined by two developmental extremes. While Scenario 1 (*Digitalized Order*) represents the peak of technological optimism, where geopolitical stability enables inclusive digitalization, Scenario 4 (*Geotech Spheres*) combines the most adverse outcomes along both axes: geopolitical fractures and mistrust lead to technological closure, and the concentration of technological power cements inequalities between privileged strategic sectors and the marginalized remainder of the global economy, which remains trapped in a state of persistent stagnation.

Focusing on the extremes serves as a strategic warning of where the world could end up if forces of fragmentation prevail, but also as a vision of the "optimal path" leading to sustainable global prosperity through stability and technological openness. Understanding the key risks and opportunities facing the contemporary world is crucial for defining strategic guidelines that can help avoid the negative scenario of *Geotech Spheres* and promote the most favorable global economic trajectory of *Digitalized Order*. To prevent persistent fragmentation and technological isolation, the focus should be placed on the following **three areas of action**:

Restoration of multilateral trust and regulatory harmonization

Instead of complete decoupling, which leads to isolationism, countries should aim for de-risking. Deepening strategic partnerships and alliances allows for economies of scale, risk sharing, and access to new opportunities. At the same time, harmonizing regulations in the fields of artificial intelligence and data transfer at the global level prevents the creation of incompatible digital blocs.

Aligning technological advancement with human capital development

Technological strategies and talent management strategies should be aligned. Investing in human capital and actively involving employees in innovation and automation processes, along with reskilling, upskilling, and workforce mobility, is crucial for addressing talent shortages. This ensures that the adoption of new technologies primarily empowers workers and builds trust, which can significantly contribute to unlocking their full productive potential.

Democratization of access to critical technologies

States should stimulate the spillover of innovations from strategic (military/government) sectors to small and medium-sized enterprises through subsidies and open innovation ecosystems that act as distributive valves. This prevents technology from becoming exclusively a "tool of power" for megacorporations and preserves the competitiveness and vitality of the overall economy.

These priority areas of action serve as a bridge between the current state and the vision outlined in Scenario 1. They directly address critical

bottlenecks such as systemic mistrust, talent shortages, and extreme concentration of power.

CONCLUSION

In researching future economic trends, multiple time horizons with varying spatial and thematic scopes are employed to ensure a comprehensive approach. The future is not a single, predetermined outcome but a dynamic set of alternative scenarios and potential systemic discontinuities. This nonlinearity is emphasized by Professor Hutchings of Princeton University, who notes that relying solely on the extrapolation of existing data can describe evolutionary changes within a given model but cannot predict the fundamental metamorphosis of a system. Identifying such qualitative leaps - symbolically represented by the transition from "caterpillar" to "butterfly", requires research imagination that goes beyond the mere mechanical projection of past trends into the future (National Intelligence Council, 2004).

The paper analyzes scenarios or "alternative worlds" defined by the WEF that we could encounter over the next five-year period, highlighting the inherent risks and opportunities as a means of strategic preparation for the future. The scenarios are structured around two key driving forces that decisively shape the future trajectory of the global economy: geopolitics and technology. The interaction between these axes has enabled the mapping of various developmental outcomes, identifying areas where linear trends give way to structural transformations. This confirms the central hypothesis of the research.

The considered scenarios for the development of the global economy represent the first in a series of WEF studies on key economic topics and their developmental implications. Operationalizing broader scenarios through thematic blocks will certainly contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of future trends. Four scenarios have already been defined, illustrating how advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and trends in the talent market could shape the future of jobs by 2030 (WEF, 2026).

The observed methodological framework imposes certain limitations on this study, which simultaneously open up avenues for future research directions. The first limitation relates to the relatively short, five-year time horizon of observation imposed by the WEF methodology. A particular challenge for future studies would be to extend this temporal horizon in order to illuminate the world's future path with "high beams." A long-term perspective is crucial for studying economic growth, as well as other economic phenomena, including climate change, population aging, fiscal sustainability, "catching up" of developing economies, and the effects of structural reforms (Nordhaus, 2017). The escalation of uncertainty in the global economic and geopolitical environment has increased the importance of long-term foresight, which has evolved from an optional practice into a fundamental instrument of strategic management.

The second limitation of the study arises from the predominantly qualitative description of the mapped WEF scenarios. Therefore, a key direction for future research involves the need to further elaborate on this scenario-based approach by formally linking it with sophisticated quantitative models of long-term structural changes in the global economy.

In this regard, a successful roadmap is provided by the research of the OECD Economics Department, which periodically publishes economic scenarios covering a longer time horizon. For example, in 2018, scenarios for the development of the global economy up to 2060 were published, representing an updated version of the 2014 scenarios, with a significant revision of the applied methodology (Guillemet and Turner, 2018; see also Jovanović Gavrilović and Gligorić Matić, 2026). In addition to the baseline scenario, alternative scenarios were created, sensitive to the effects that changes in institutional quality and policy can have over the medium and long term. In 2025, the OECD published scenarios for the development of the global economy up to 2100, emphasizing climate change and the energy transition (Guillemet, 2025).

The concept of the future is inextricably linked with paradoxes (National Intelligence Council, 2017). The same global trends that point to a difficult and bleak future also carry the potential for a better and more prosperous tomorrow. To address the challenges of the days ahead, economic systems - from national to global, require a new level of resilience, so-called resilience 2.0 (European Commission, 2025). This entails a shift from a predominantly reactive approach to a proactive, forward-looking one, enabling the anticipation of events, resource optimization, and preparation for various future scenarios. In conditions of global uncertainty, which is greater today than ever before, a whole range of divergent scenarios is possible, including those that until recently seemed unrealistic.

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