

Checkmate or stalemate: The global standoff between world leaders and citizens

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From the beginning of 2023, the geopolitical landscape has been marked by a series of escalating tensions and civil unrest – evidence of deep-seated economic, political and social discord across the globe.



Some analysts are questioning

whether businesses should expect civil unrest on a global scale, which could significantly impact market stability and operational continuity.

China's central government is faced with concerns from economic slowdown to public dissent as a result of strict policies, which might well signify a growing divide between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its people. The Russian people are trying to come to terms with the repercussions of its government's military campaign in Ukraine which caused international disapproval. Many Ukrainians have been forced to abandon their homes as a result of the conflict and turmoil. The people of Iran are protesting against economic hardships and suffocating social policies, while pushing for freedom and government accountability. In Israel and Palestine, the conflict has resulted in unrest and instability as both peoples grapple with life in a warzone. The regime and people of North Korea are subject to severe constraints as a consequence of its isolation, the full extent of which remains unverified due to the country's restricted access and nature. Together, these cases reveal a tapestry of global discontent, indicating a pivotal phase in international human relations that challenges the fabric of governance itself.

Exodus and dissent

This year has witnessed the geopolitical landscape of China, Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Palestine and North Korea being subjected to extreme tensions and conflict.

The CCP's rigid controls in China are facing pushback as the people's demands for rights collide with the government's authoritarianism. Russia was driven into controversy following its conflict in Ukraine which has prompted massive sanctions packages from the West.

The younger members of the Iranian population are regularly in disagreement with their conservative regime, resulting in protests against social restrictions and economic wrongdoing. Up until the recent ceasefire, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over land and resources has resulted in relentless instability and suffering of the Palestinian people. North Korea's isolated state under Kim Jong-Un's rule sees concerning economic hardships and human rights issues.

The spark of rebellion: from Tiananmen to today

Both authoritarian and democratic governments are deeply aware of the potential for civilian protests to escalate, leading to tragic outcomes. The student-led call for freedom of speech and an end to government corruption in Tiananmen Square ended in a bloody massacre and it still acts as a stark reminder. Even in democratic nations like the USA, there has been an upsurge in civilian (often pro-Trump) demonstrations, culminating in clashes, violence and subsequent arrests. The strength of feeling is hard to ignore.

Today's digital tech and social media has enhanced the scope of protesting. The Arab Spring protests demonstrated how social media could be used to communicate, arrange and voice dissent across country borders. Non-physical protests can now spread at incredible speed, uniting disparate groups and spurring public opinion online. Although they can be subject to interference from government surveillance and misinformation, they can still transcend from online activism into solid tangible change. Widespread civilian dissent demanding political and social reform – whether violent or not – demonstrates the strength of feeling in the populace. Governments are constantly aware that it could easily erupt at any moment.

Assessing the realities: could global civil unrest truly unfold?

In the past, significant civil unrest was caused by specific political, economic and social factors and was typically contained within a nation's borders or regions.

However, with today's seamless information flow and the interdependency of economies, public discontent in one region can now ignite significant reactions in another.

Despite this, the level of global contagion required to cause a global civil protest occurring in concert is unlikely. The issues that concern the people within each nation are, of course, diverse. Civil grievances generally start from a specific historical or cultural circumstance that does not usually translate across borders. Governments vary in how they attempt to mitigate and respond to a crisis – whether through diplomacy, economic and political reform, or through brute force and violence.

Conclusion

The global backdrop to these civilian protests is one where geopolitical relationships are unpredictable and uncertain, with many longstanding alliances now in flux. Self-interest is the order of the day as nations look to bolster their fragile economies and look to boost their own fortunes.

A coordinated global protest on a significant scale is unlikely – but protests at local and regional levels are highly likely to increase. The political and social climate in China, Russia, Iran, Palestine, North Korea, the UK and the USA serves to highlight current global sentiment. Demand by civilians for political integrity and economic stability will continue to be boldly, and sometimes violently, expressed. On the global chessboard, the dynamic between world leaders and citizens continues to unfold as a complex interplay of power.

'People shouldn't be afraid of their government. Governments should be afraid of their people.' Alan Moore, author.

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