

Seven Dynamic Tensions for the Coming Decade

In the newly published book, Powerful Times, Global Business Network CEO Eamonn Kelly digs into the coming decade. The thesis of this book is that we’re not just living through an age of change; we’re experiencing a *change of age*—the most profound inflection point in human history since the Enlightenment. From terrorism and nuclear proliferation to emerging technologies that could change the nature of humanity to the rise of new and innovative economic powers, Kelly weaves together seven powerful “dynamic tensions” that will fundamentally reshape human life in the coming decades. Eamonn Kelly offers breakthrough insights into how these tensions will conflict and interact to create huge waves of change beyond anything we’ve ever seen before. Using scenario thinking techniques pioneered at Royal Dutch/Shell and nurtured at Global Business Network, Kelly evokes the different futures that might unfold as a result of the interplay of these dynamic tensions—and the profound implications for society and business.

AND	
We enjoy unprecedented CLARITY , driven by abundant information, powerful analysis, ubiquitous connectivity, and remarkable transparency	while these same forces also empower CRAZINESS , as every storyline and conspiracy theory, no matter how bizarre, can be supported by some distortion of real data and spread like a virus.
SECULAR ideals continue to drive much of modern civilization, especially with regards to governance and commerce	yet have to coexist and coevolve with powerful, and powerfully different, SACRED worldviews.
The U.S. seems set to call upon its unmatched military POWER , yet may face challenges that hard power alone cannot meet even as its soft power weakens	contributing to a growing sense of VULNERABILITY in the Western world as a variety of looming threats come into sharper focus.
TECHNOLOGY ACCELERATION proceeds apace, providing us with ever greater power to manipulate our world and increasingly to manipulate nature and the very essence of life itself,	triggering increased (but globally uneven) moral, ethical, and pragmatic concern and PUSHBACK against the untrammelled pursuit of science.
The economy becomes increasingly INTANGIBLE as the relationship between mass and value continues to decline in a world of services, experiences, and virtualization	yet the PHYSICAL economy also matters more as we have to renew and create critical infrastructure everywhere.
PROSPERITY spreads further around the globe as new players exert increasing influence on the world economy	while DECLINE in some countries and regions and among certain groups leads to increased polarization between those doing well and those faring poorly.
The needs and expectations of PEOPLE lead to an increased mandate to pay serious attention to the principles of sustainability	yet the PLANET exerts its own clear authority and autonomy, leading to deeper and more urgent concern about the robustness of our civilization’s footprint.

Clarity AND Craziness

In the coming decade, our world will grow more transparent. Our ability to collect, integrate, interpret, and distribute data will increase exponentially; sensors and connective and surveillance technologies will converge; and access to a staggering array of words, images, and sounds will spread globally. The results will be profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, our insight into the workings of corporations and governments, our knowledge of science, and our understanding of systemic global issues will be greatly enhanced. On the other hand, we will also experience an explosion of fear and confusion, fueled by our ubiquitous access to immense amounts of information. We will see competing interpretations of major world events, driven by ideology and informed by selective “evidence.” A growing abundance of conspiracy theories and falsehoods will travel the world instantaneously, and the very tools of connectivity that will enable so much transparency will also serve to enable ever-more sophisticated means of theft and fraud.

Secular AND Sacred

In the coming decade, we will witness a growing tension between the secular models of society, governance, business, and economics that have characterized Western modernity and the increasingly sacred worldviews of billions of people on every part of the planet. The secular lies at the heart of western notions of civilization, with reason, science and logic trumping religion and belief in the management of civic affairs and the public domain. Secular principles are so embedded in our laws and our institutions that, for the most part, we no longer notice them. Yet the power of the sacred as a mobilizing force is making itself felt with increasing strength. Fundamentalist movements (themselves a direct response to secularization) have emerged in every major religion and are gaining muscle on most continents—and by no means exclusively in the Islamic nations. Meanwhile, an almost opposite—and certainly gentler and more inclusive—“sacred” reaction against the strictly secular can be seen in the rise of spirituality, which also seems poised to play a role in defining our future values, customs, and behaviors.

Power AND Vulnerability

In the coming decade, the accumulation and exercise of power will rise in strategic importance as a new global order begins to take shape. The U.S. will be obliged to confront and resolve the challenges sparked by its global military supremacy, and it will continue to wrestle with the delicate interplay between “hard” and “soft” power as both are deployed to achieve complex foreign policy objectives. In the shadow of the U.S., many other nations will be required to review their military policies and expenditures; all over the world, nations will have to distinguish more clearly between the metaphoric and literal meanings of the “war on terror.” As they do so, the paradoxical relationship between power and vulnerability will come into sharper relief. The U.S. and the rest of the world will continue to experience the trauma of terrorism, both real and imagined. Other vulnerabilities will be felt more acutely as well. The growing tentacles of organized crime, the fragility of our increasingly vital connectivity technologies, new and rapidly spreading diseases—these and others will contribute to a rising, global sense of threat.

Technology Acceleration AND Pushback

In the coming decade, new technologies will continue to proliferate at a rapid pace, creating new opportunities and sources of value. In the next 10 years, we will witness further advances in the ways in which three technology domains in particular—computing, biotechnology, and nanotechnology—become even more “mutually catalytic,” enabling and accelerating one another. This will open up startling new opportunities for sensing and connecting, for mimicking and changing nature, and for radical enhancement of human beings themselves. Not surprisingly, we will see this “progress” increasingly challenged by those who fear its ultimate, and perhaps unintended, consequences. The resulting tension between scientists and technologists and their detractors will be exacerbated by a fundamental lack of shared mental models, language systems, and knowledge bases, requiring us to develop new approaches to talking about these issues.

Intangible AND Physical Economies

In the coming decade, we will see a continued and accelerating transition from the industrial to the post-industrial era. With it we will experience the further rise of an “intangible” economy, in which the relationship between value and weight continues to break down and an increasing amount of what we consider valuable will be found in things we cannot hold: services, experiences, and relationships. But even as value migrates to the intangible world, the physical world of infrastructure will take on new importance and its maintenance will assume new urgency. Physical infrastructure will experience severe pressures in many parts of the world, becoming even more desperately in need of update and overhaul. We will need to find ways to prevent the potentially catastrophic consequences associated with infrastructural failures in a variety of arenas—most critically, water.

Prosperity AND Decline

In the coming decade, an increasingly global economy will generate different and seemingly contradictory economic conditions around the world. The spread of the market economy—and its substantial reinvention by new entrants—will create new prosperity and opportunity for millions of people, and proponents of free trade will focus on these positive developments. Yet this economic dynamism will also generate friction for many. There will surely be absolute decline in some parts of the world, especially areas already blighted by conflict, corruption, disease and environmental catastrophe; many people in developing countries will become more aware of their relative poverty as global communication continues to shrink the planet. Relative decline will also be a harsh reality for a growing number of citizens in Europe and North America.

People AND Planet

In the coming decade, we will develop a deeper understanding of how to meet our growing needs and wants while protecting our planet and its abilities to provide a home for future generations. We will begin to see the interrelatedness of the human economy and Earth’s ecosystems more clearly and realize that there may be planetary limits to our growth. As a result, we will take the concept, if not the practice, of sustainability more seriously. However, we will also begin to understand the profound autonomy of the planet—its long cycles of change and transformation that occur independently of our presence and our actions. We will then reach a collective realization that is more ancient wisdom than modern worldview—that the planet does not belong to us but we belong to it, and it will survive and change no matter what we do, while the opposite may not be true.