



An evolving global geopolitical landscape

Overview

The world is moving away from the post-WWII international order. The global environment is becoming more unpredictable due to increased competition between countries, economic nationalism, technological rivalry and weakening international cooperation. These changes will continue to affect many sectors, including sport, creating both challenges and opportunities.

This document explores:

- the main trends shaping global politics today
- whether we are at a turning point in geopolitics
- the challenges, opportunities and actions for sport
- which scenarios best describe the current situation and what might happen next.



Key forces shaping global geopolitics

Conflict

The World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Risks Report highlights state-based armed conflict as the biggest threat this year. Recent crises in Ukraine, India/Pakistan, Sudan, Gaza and the broader Middle East show how fragile global security has become.

Economic confrontation

The US, under Trump, imposed tariffs that disrupted its economic relationship with China and even its allies, creating uncertainty in global markets. These tensions are encouraging new economic centres to form outside traditional hubs.

Changing trade relationships

While post-war economic systems have been robust, countries like those in BRICS are looking to reduce their dependence on the US dollar. Although this "de-dollarisation" hasn't advanced much, distrust in US economic policy may speed it up. Countries are increasingly trading with partners that are politically closer to them.

Challenges to international institutions

Rising conflict and protectionism are straining organisations like the IMF and World Bank. If countries stop respecting US patents and copyrights, it could have major economic and non-economic consequences.

Technology competition

The US and China are fiercely competing in AI and quantum computing. The US is trying to limit China's access to advanced tech, while Chinese firms are rapidly developing new AI models. This rivalry affects both innovation and national security. Cybersecurity threats, such as state-backed hacking, are also on the rise.

Climate change as a risk multiplier

Environmental crises like extreme weather are worsening financial instability and could lead to more conflict over resources, adding to the world's geopolitical tensions.

Is the post-war order ending?

The system established after WWII was based on:

- a global economy focused on shared prosperity
- the belief that democracies are less likely to fight each other
- US military power as a guarantee of security.

All these pillars are now under significant strain. World leaders, including New Zealand, have noted major changes in global affairs, prompting countries to rethink their defence strategies.

Challenges and opportunities for sport

Challenges



Disrupted international events and travel

Armed conflicts, sanctions and political disputes can restrict travel, increase insurance costs and limit participation in international competitions. These disruptions can lead to boycotts or the exclusion of athletes from certain nations, as seen in past Olympic boycotts.



Increased politicisation of sport

Sports events are increasingly used as tools of soft power. National objectives and geopolitical rivalries may influence decisions about participation and event hosting, raising the stakes for athletes and organisations operating in politically sensitive regions.



Financial and sponsorship instability

Global economic uncertainty and shifting alliances make sponsorships riskier, particularly if sponsors are linked to countries involved in conflicts or sanctions. This threatens the financial stability of national sport organisations.



Cybersecurity and digital threats

As sport become more digital, the risk of cyberattacks grows. Organisations may struggle to protect sensitive data and event security, especially with limited resources.



Athlete activism and political risk

Heightened tensions can lead to increased scrutiny of athletes' backgrounds and activism, complicating duty of care and risk management for travelling athletes.



Fragmentation of international rules

Erosion of respect for international legal norms could spill over into sport, creating uncertainty around governance, event hosting and dispute resolution.

Challenges cont.



Security and safety risks

Heightened geopolitical tensions have increased security concerns at sporting events, including threats of terrorism, protests and social unrest, jeopardising the safety of athletes, officials and spectators.



Political interference and nationalism

The politicisation of sport is intensifying, with governments using events for diplomatic leverage, leading to disputes over athlete participation, boycotts and overshadowing of sporting spirit by nationalism.



Economic and financial uncertainty

Fluctuating global markets and increased costs for security and insurance pose financial challenges for sports organisations.



Shifting power dynamics and governance

The rise of Eastern powers is challenging traditional Western dominance in global sport, leading to new alliances and shifting centres of influence.



Integrity and ethical challenges

Geopolitical tensions can lead to increased doping, corruption and unethical practices, putting the integrity of governing bodies at risk.

Opportunities



Enhanced role in diplomacy

Sport can serve as a bridge in divided times, offering platforms for dialogue and engagement between nations - even when official diplomatic channels are strained.



Innovation in event delivery

Geopolitical and economic pressures may drive innovation in event organisation, including greater use of digital platforms, hybrid competitions and new formats that reduce reliance on international travel.



Diversification of funding and partnerships

To reduce exposure to volatile sponsors and markets, organisations can diversify funding sources and explore new partnerships and revenue streams.



Strengthened risk management

The challenging environment encourages improved risk assessment, crisis planning and cybersecurity, making organisations more resilient.

Opportunities cont.



Leadership in social issues

Sport can lead in promoting values, such as inclusion, peace and fair play, helping to counteract the negative effects of geopolitical division.



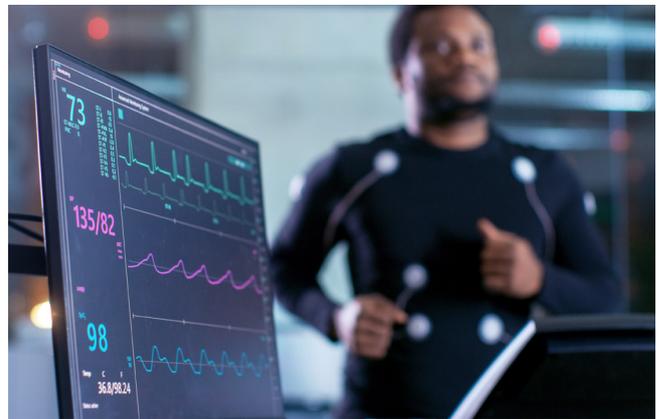
Sport diplomacy and peacebuilding

Hosting international events can promote global cohesion and cooperation, offering a platform for countries to showcase openness and build soft power.



Expansion into emerging markets

The shift to new geographic centres presents opportunities for growth, new audiences and investment in sport infrastructure, especially in regions like the Middle East and India.



Innovation and professionalisation

The need to adapt is driving the professionalisation of sports organisations, with increased use of data analytics, talent development and operational efficiency, as well as new digital experiences for fan engagement.

Future scenario alignment

The four scenarios previously prepared for Sport NZ used the following statements to describe potential geopolitical conditions:

Growth

A continuance of the present conditions *characterised by persistent power struggles, competition and friction between nation-states.*

Discipline

The emergence of a new framework that mitigates current challenges, characterised by *pragmatic cooperation to suppress regional tensions and address global challenges.*

Collapse

The loss of previous structures and social arrangements that moderate relationships, behaviour and systems that, in terms of geopolitics, would see an *escalation of tensions, leading to regional or global military conflicts and instability.*

Transform

The emergence of a new paradigm that fundamentally shifts the current trajectory of development. This would be characterised by an *active pursuit of multilateral understanding that addresses shared challenges and promotes peace.*

Right now, the world most closely matches the “growth” scenario, with ongoing competition and the decline of US dominance. Short-term political changes could push us toward either “discipline” (more cooperation) or “collapse” (more conflict). A true “transform” scenario, where countries actively work together to solve global problems, seems unlikely at present.

Key questions national sport organisations should be asking

Crisis preparedness	How can we strengthen risk management and crisis response plans to address geopolitical disruptions while safeguarding event operations and organisational integrity?
Financial resilience	What strategies should be implemented to diversify funding streams, reduce reliance on politically sensitive sponsors and evaluate financial risks/opportunities when expanding into geopolitically volatile markets?
Safety and security protocols	What protocols are needed to ensure the safety of athletes, staff and spectators in high-risk regions, including measures to mitigate terrorism, civil unrest and targeted threats?
Ethical governance and activism	How can we balance athlete activism, political neutrality and ethical standards amid increasing politicisation, external pressures and risks to institutional integrity?
Sport as a diplomatic tool	In a fragmented global landscape, how can sport be leveraged to foster diplomacy, bridge geopolitical divides and promote soft power without compromising safety or neutrality?
Structural adaptations	How should athlete pathways, funding models and event hosting strategies adapt to the rise of mega-leagues, privatised events and shifting global power dynamics?
Integrity under pressure	What safeguards are necessary to protect sport from unethical practices such as doping and corruption, exacerbated by geopolitical tensions, and how can transparency be maintained?

Immediate actions for national sports organisations to consider

Strategic governance and risk management	Dedicated board session	Host focused meetings to analyse geopolitical impacts and align responses with organisational strategy.
	Integrated risk framework update	Address disrupted events/travel, security threats and cybersecurity gaps.
	Policy alignment	Align policies for international participation, athlete activism and sponsor exposure to conflicts.
	Crisis preparedness	Develop response plans for sanctions, boycotts, evacuations and rapid geopolitical shifts.
Stakeholder collaboration and intelligence sharing	Consultative engagement	Partner with athletes, staff and government agencies for risk insights and safety needs.
	Sector-wide coordination	Share intelligence and contingency strategies with NSOs, federations and event organisers.
Operational resilience and safety protocols	Event security overhaul	Strengthen physical and digital safeguards for venues, data and personnel.
	Travel and evacuation standards	Formalise guidelines for high-risk regions, including emergency support systems.
Ethical governance and integrity assurance	Policy modernisation	Audit anti-corruption, anti-doping and governance procedures to counter exploitation.
Education and diplomatic leadership	Geopolitical training	Implement scenario-based workshops for your staff/board on global trends and conflict resolution.
	Sport diplomacy initiatives	Leverage events to promote NZ's values and monitor shifts in international sport governance.
	Transparent communication	Proactively update members and public on geopolitical stances to reinforce trust.

Summary of significant changes: geopolitics and sport

Feature	Post-WWII order	Current geopolitical situation	Implication for sport
Dominant ideology	Promotion of liberal democracy	Rise of authoritarianism and economic nationalism	Greater emphasis on national success, less on wellbeing and fairness
Economic system	Emphasis on free trade agreements and open markets	Trade wars driving protectionism and global trade realignment	Economic uncertainty undermining organisational finances, spectator purchasing power and event viability
Security landscape	Bipolar (Cold War), then unipolar (Post-Cold War)	Regression to spheres of 'great power' influence and rivalry	Realignment of competitive arena with potential emergence of new alliances and country blocs
Status of international institutions	Central role in cooperation, crisis intervention and governance	Reduced influence as major powers ignore international law	Fragmentation of support for global initiatives to enforce integrity
Role of the United States	Enforcer of post-war settlement and associated institutions	Rising isolationism leading to a loss of influence	Decreased financial support for international organisations
Nature of conflict	Primarily ideological (e.g. Cold War) via proxy conflicts	Increasing interstate competition, threatens broader conflict	Disruption to global patterns of movement and threats to individual security
Technological landscape	Primarily focused on military and space race (Cold War)	Vigorous competition in AI, quantum computing, and cybersecurity	Increasing digital 'arms race' underpinning on-field success; potential for increased cyber-attacks and data compromise



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