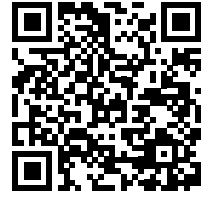


# From covid to climate emergency: our context of crises and uncertainties



## Bruno Mações

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### Lecture presenter:

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**Abstract:** The main topics covered in this lecture concern some insights about his last book, “Geopolitics for the End of Time”. Besides that, Mações will talk about the pandemic and its geopolitical consequences and the strategies for coping with it.

**Keywords:** pandemic, post-pandemic strategies, geopolitics, strategic autonomy, climate emergency



**OLIVER:** Welcome to the Innovation Week 2021, Bruno Mações. It is a great pleasure having you here with us. It will be a pleasure to hear your thoughts.



**BRUNO:** Good morning! It is a pleasure to be here. And, it is a pleasure to share this section with you, Oliver. I am a great admirer of your work, but we have never met. So, it is very gratifying to meet you virtually.

I want to talk a little bit about the geopolitical consequences and strategies regarding the pandemic. Which is the subject of my latest book, published one or two months ago. Let's start from the beginning: "How did we experience the pandemic?". In my case, in particular, at one point, it started to look like it was something similar to space travel. Every one of us had to fall back to our capsules, to our spaceships, because our outside contact had to be drastically reduced. In many cases, like in Europe, in the USA, in Brazil, in India and in Russia, the lockdowns were so strict, that our contact with the outside was mostly through platforms, like the one we are using now. What was very similar to traveling in a spaceship. And, it seemed to me that it was almost an announcement of our entry into the space age.

Why did we have this feeling? Because, suddenly, the nature around us, the natural environment became hostile, aggressive, unsuitable for human habitation or habitat. From this point of view, it was simultaneously the return to a more or less distant past, in which the human beings had to fight a necessarily hostile, aggressive and dangerous environment for their lives. But it was also a projection for a future in which we will have, once more in the space age, to venture into environments that are not yet tamed, not yet controlled.

Therefore, to me, it started to feel like the last few decades, maybe the last few centuries, were from this point of view, an interregnum (“a transition period”), at least in the Western world. It is relevant to highlight that there is an important contrast between the western world and the developing world. In this sense, at least in the Western world, the central idea was the one in which we had already conquered nature in a permanent and ultimate way.

However, the pandemic was a very humiliating experience for the westerners, especially in Europe and in the United States, because it sent us back to a world where we are still deeply vulnerable, in which we feel weak and powerless in the face of a natural environment, since it is capable of destroying our plans overnight. For instance, weddings were canceled. Professional lives were changed. And families were not able to meet.

Indeed, from this point of view, the social reaction to the virus was something that far exceeded what we could have expected. Hence, it was a re-entry into the world, which we thought we no longer knew and which we thought was not possible anymore. The question that arises, from this perspective is, what are the political and strategic consequences, if we take into account the idea that the natural world around us is no longer the same as in the last few decades or the last two centuries?

And, above all, what if we take seriously the idea that the promises which were made, that we would be able to tame and control natural forces once and for all, were utopian and unrealistic? Particularly, because we know that the pandemic was some kind of general trial for the climate crises and the climate emergency. Many of the phenomena that we saw during the pandemic are going to be the ones which will return, one way or another, in the coming decades, during the climate emergency.

Therefore, what are the consequences of the pandemic for the States? First of all, I would say that the pandemic taught us some important lessons, from my point of view, of what is going to be a climate emergency.

And yet, all those cooperation and multilateralism ideas while facing situations of global crisis turned out to be, in fact, fragile, non-existent and completely disconnected from reality.

When I was a politician in Portugal, many times when we had difficulties with a communication of the European Union, for instance, to talk about the relationship with Russia, it was used, very often, a strategy of talking about a possible pandemic in the future, as a situation in which collaboration would be natural, obvious and easy. However, this turned out to be completely false. Because the pandemic showed us that cooperation and collaboration among the states were neither easy, nor natural. On the contrary, the pandemic had become an arena of intense and sharp competition among states. I do not believe that this happened only due to the irresponsibility of politicians or political leaders. It was a mental attitude common to the political leaders and the public agencies.

We saw, for example, that the Financial Times, in the first days of the pandemic, created a sort of ranking, where we could compare our country with the others. The name was, and it is still available: “How your country compares.”

Hence, this exercise turned out to be very addictive for all of us. For instance, to see which country was playing the best role, and which one was in the end of the list. In other words, it became some kind of sporting competition, in rather bad taste, from that point of view.

But, very quickly, it became almost obvious and natural for all of us. It lasted throughout the first phase of the pandemic, before the vaccines. And also, after that, throughout the vaccination period, particularly in Europe.

There was an intense competition, for instance, between the European Union and the United Kingdom to see which one would give their voters the best results, regarding getting the available vaccines. And, in many cases, there was even a certain rejoicing, when our direct competitor failed or did not get results. Thus, the cooperation was essentially non-existent, and what we saw was an intense competition. However, in fact, it was not a direct competition among the states. But instead, it was a competition which, from my point of view, was similar to a game, since the states were committed to playing a role or to overcoming certain challenges and tasks to control the environment, the nature and the threats posed by this new hostile and aggressive environment.

Therefore, there was a ranking to know which countries were better performing the tasks and responding to the challenges, in comparison to their competitors, something very similar to a game. Actually, games are also a competition between two, three or several competitors, who try to perform a certain task better than others.

In this sense, does this announce to us what the response to the climate emergency will be in the future? So, it is easy to make analogies, which are worrying, but also very justified. The same way we saw during the pandemic, a certain attempt to benefit from the failure of others. For instance, by attracting value and production networks to the country which was better performing the task of fighting the pandemic.

Hence, it is entirely possible that, in the future, certain regions in certain countries, if they can fight climate change better than their rivals, will be able to attract talent, qualified professionals, companies and value networks. Namely, if a city like Singapore, proves to be capable of fighting climate changes through city transformations, such as air conditioning and public transportation suitable to a new era of climate changes. Then, it is possible to imagine that talents, capitals and value networks will move from other places to Dirham, for example. Thus, I believe it is easy to think of this scenario as some kind of replica of what happened during the pandemic.

And, from a more radical perspective, now making an analogy with the vaccine phase, it is possible to also imagine that certain countries will try to control critical technologies to respond to the climate emergency, once they know that these technologies have become dominant in the future. So, whoever has access to them, will be in a position to exert economic and even political power over other countries.

Likewise, the truth is that we saw, in the past, that there is a very direct correspondence between the new energetic paradigms and the emergence of new superpowers. In fact, I would like to draw the attention of the audience to this remarkable coincidence. Neither the United Kingdom, nor the United States, in the 19th and 20th centuries became the dominant powers through the World Wars.

The United States was already a dominant economic power, even before World War I and before World War II. It seems to me that the key factor was the emergence, either in the first industrial revolution or in the second industrial revolution, of completely new energetic and economic paradigms. Which were based on steam power and coal, in England, in the United Kingdom case.

And after that, based on electricity and fossil energy, in the case of the second industrial revolution, and the emergence of the United States as a dominant economic power. Thus, it is easy to imagine and – it was something that I verified, by talking to officers in China while I was living in Beijing – that China thinks of a third industrial energy revolution, in which the green energies replace the currently dominant energies. Besides that, it is an opportunity, more than a global war, so that China would become the new global superpower.

Therefore, we have to think more and more about the climate emergency, not as a moment when the States will gather and collaborate to solve the problem; but, in fact, for good and for bad, it will be a moment of intense geopolitical competition. And I say, for good and for bad, because evidently, we would expect something different. It never ceases to be a disappointment to realize that even the moments of crisis for our species, in general, will be used as a moment of competition.

On the other hand, I must confess that I found some optimism. Because, it seems to me, that the more this strategic aspect of the climate crisis is absorbed by the states, the more results we can expect. Hence, I expect more from China and the United States, once the leaders realize that it is at stake as a global power.

In comparison with how climate issues have been treated until today, as a moral issue, as a matter of moral responsibility. And, I think that, as long as it is a matter of moral responsibility and not a matter of power, the results will be less impressive. I am afraid to tell, but it seems to me that this is the reality.

Finally, the final comments concern the way the states have been reacting during the pandemic, and the way they will react in the future to that new situation. Thus, instead of having a scheme in which the states directly fight each other and the dominant relations are the ones among the states. What we have today is a scheme in which we should include the relations with this new hostile and aggressive nature, and with an environment that should be controlled and tamed again.

Therefore, what have we seen until today? We have seen much greater concern than before the pandemic, with the idea of Strategic Autonomy. Besides that, globalization is not coming to an end. Since then, we have not even seen a reduction in world trade. However, it is being replaced by a new model of globalization. Not a globalization on autopilot, but a globalization in which the power of the states is also important.



And the states, by being integrated with each other in the same global system, are permanently in competition and have to worry about the accumulation of power and the Strategic Autonomy, in order to face this competition. In this sense, what we have seen is actually a series of developments happening in parallel. In China, in the United States and in the European Union, they all point in the same direction. Thus, in the EU, we talk a lot about Strategic Autonomy, in security and defense issues, but especially in economic matters. In view of this, there are several new economic instruments, which are being developed for the European Union to be more resilient and more autonomous in its economic relations.

They involve limitations on global trade, privileging European economic agents over others, entering into trade agreements with strategic partners, energy matters and energetic security issues and many others. All of them encompassed under the heading of Strategic Autonomy.

Curiously, we see the same development in China and the United States. However, in China, the label or name given to these instruments, since last year, is the idea of Dual Circulation or Double Circulation. What does the Dual Circulation mean? It means that, in fact, there are two separate economies, a domestic economy and a global economy. Therefore, they do not obey the same rules. According to the Chinese Communist Party, the global economy has to be subject to the power and the strategy of states, and only then, can an economy prosper. While in the domestic sphere, impartial rules and market rules can be adopted. Moreover, there is huge skepticism and cynicism in Beijing about this idea. However, what is actually dominant is the idea that in the global economy, the states compete directly with each other.

Furthermore, the idea of state capitalism has a lot to do with this as well. Namely, with the idea that there are no impartial rules in the global economy, once there is an economic competition among the states. Thus, we also see the same kind of development in the United States. For instance, the US Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, at her initial congressional hearing, in response to a direct question if she still believed in trade agreements as a way to create free trade at global level, she answered that, a few years ago, she did believe. However, nowadays, she does not believe anymore, what appeared to me, at the time, to be a very important revelation. Besides being a symbol that there is something different about the American attitude, concerning global trade.

Since then, we have seen several important developments, which, in the United States, are usually grouped under the name of Resilience of Global Supply Chains or Resilience of Global Value Chains. Consequently, that is the reason why we have similar developments in Europe, China and in the United States. Although the names are different, oftentimes.

I think that, even the European name, Strategic Autonomy, is more general and easier to understand. But the developments happen in all the big economic agents. In addition to that, at the same time we are not going to have the end of capitalism, nor the end of its structures. However, we will have a new form of capitalism, which is a more oriented capitalism. I would say that it is a capitalism oriented to the rise of national power and to the control over our natural environment and the threats that result from it, besides being a more technological capitalism.

Since this is the goal, control over the environment. And also, a capitalism, which, once more, no longer obeys that model of automatic rules of capitalism or globalization on autopilot. Nonetheless, the political and economic model that is still in force in Portugal and certainly, in Brazil as well, is what we oftentimes call neoliberalism.

Which we actually understand as capitalism on autopilot, subject to more or less automatic rules. But it seems to me that this understanding of capitalism is indeed in crisis. And it is being replaced by capitalism in which the functioning of market rules is not the ultimate end, but it is a means to another kind of end. We can see this clearly in China, where these market rules are used as an ultimate end, namely, the aggrandizement and rejuvenation of Chinese society and state.

The second aspect, to end the lecture. Thus, the consequences of the pandemic, something that seems clear to me, is the technological matter. In other words, to summarize, I see two big strategic consequences of the pandemic. Therefore, the first one is the development of a certain understanding of Strategic Autonomy, namely, national sufficiency and the power of the States over the economy, capitalism and globalization. This is the first strategic consequence, which clearly was a result of the pandemic. And, in China's case, we can even see, if we want to carefully investigate, the new strategy of Dual or Double Economy. Hence, in the first speech in which Xi Jinping develops this new strategy, he directly connects it to the pandemic. In this sense, the speech was very much built on the following terms: "The pandemic showed us 'X'. Then, this results in a new economic understanding, which we call the Double Economy".

Therefore, maybe China's case is the one in which the connection between the pandemic and the new economic ideas is the clearest. But this also happens in the United States and in the European Union.

Thus, the first consequence of the pandemic is this new development of the understanding of Strategic Autonomy. The second consequence happens, to me, at the level of our understanding of technology. I have been talking about it, and I argue in my book about a new technological acceleration. Namely, this acceleration was a direct response to certain ideas defended by a group of authors in the United States, among whom, Tara Coen, Peter Thiel and Robert J. Gordon, who defended, a decade ago, around 2010, the idea that we had entered into a sort of technological stagnation, with repercussions on economic stagnation.

And the truth is that, throughout my lifetime, the technological development we have seen, clearly seems to me to be low-impact technological developments, when compared to the technological development in the rest of the 20th century. In view of this, Gordon used to like asking his students, in his lectures, if they would prefer having a smartphone or piped water at home. And often, the answer was the same, every one of them would prefer having piped water at home, instead of having a smartphone.

Then, Robert J. Gordon concluded, from this, when he analyzed the big technological developments between 1980 and 2020, that the smartphone was not so impressive. Especially when compared over time, on a larger time scale, with other previous inventions. Therefore, it seems to me that, although the pandemic is not the only reason, evidently, it has provided a new understanding of technology and a technological acceleration, which, in fact, we are already seeing. We only need to look at the daily news, in the newspapers to realize that something is happening.

Thus, I think the pandemic has shown us that we have to have a different comprehension of technology. Besides that, it also showed us how the vaccines as well as its rapid development were absolutely critical in preventing a political, social and economic crisis, which would be extremely deep and with unforeseeable consequences at a global level and, certainly, in the United States.

For this reason, we have to think more and more about technology, not as a response for the problems which already exist, but as a way to respond to potential problems. Moreover, we have to develop technological responses to problems, which in many cases, we cannot even anticipate nor imagine. Accordingly, this is a fundamentally different understanding of technology.

Because it implies a certain deliberate acceleration of technological development, once we know that we do not live – as I mentioned in the beginning of the lecture – in that placid, peaceful and domesticated nature in which we believed we lived. And, when I say “we believed”, I mean the Western societies.

Because, in places like Africa and India, in fact, that understanding of nature, as something placid and innocent, was never truly adopted. To end, this technological acceleration, which we can see in biomedicine, for instance. In which there are impressive developments in several areas, such as the vaccines against Malaria. But also, in areas like, anti-aging, among others.

In addition to that, this has been seen even in energy, with very impressive proposals, for example, in the field of nuclear fusion. We can see that, in cases of space exploration, where, for the first time since 1969, we have again a certain enthusiasm for what can happen in the next decades. Maybe with a manned trip to Mars.

Furthermore, we have the cryptocurrencies and the development of this new understanding of the internet as Web Three, which indeed is a radical change in our knowledge of the internet. More recently, we have also seen the development of the MetaVerse, which is in fact, a radical revolution in the way we relate to the world. Therefore, I believe it is possible that, in the future, we will remember the pandemic as the beginning of an era of fundamental technological acceleration. Then, I would just call the attention to the fact that such technological acceleration is deeply connected to the first aspect I mentioned before.

Namely, the idea of the states increasingly competing with each other, to respond to the challenges posed by the natural environment, which is more and more hostile and aggressive. Especially, as we truly enter the age of climate change and also the space age.

Hence, those two points are very related. Because, living in the planet Earth, with a temperature of 2 or 2,7 or even 3 degrees above the pre industrial average, will be comparable to leave the Earth we have known over the last ten millennia, and indeed, landing in a completely new, unpredictable and hostile planet, with which we will have to deal.

Thank you very much! I believe now, we will have some time to debate, and make questions and answers.



**OLIVER:** Thank you very much, Bruno! We have many challenges ahead, as we could see! Thank you very much for the insights and provocations! Ultimately, we have many questions. Thank you to all those who sent questions and also voted on the questions. I hope we can make most of them, while Bruno is here with us. The first question I would like to ask is, “How do you evaluate the confrontation that will come between the two superpowers, the United States and China?”

Because, in the 20th century, it was not only a situation of military tension, but also a clash of ideas, of capitalism against communism. Now, will we have some kind of confrontation of ideas as well? Or, will it be simply a fight for power?



**BRUNO:** I believe that, very clearly, we will have a clash of ideas. For instance, China has a certain model of social organization, which is different from the Western world. Although it is not as rigid, nor so ideological as the Soviet. What I consider to be an advantage that China has, when we want to compare it with the Soviet Union. Once many of the ideas, which have been developed by Chinese intellectuals and party officers, are still a bit boiling and under development.

And, there are internal debates, even though they are not public, but they exist, about this model of organization of Chinese society. But there are already some clear ideas about those differences. There is much greater emphasis on economic rights. Besides a much greater emphasis on the relation between the collective and the individual. In other words, the idea that the individual has, ultimately, to fit into a certain collective. Furthermore, there is a much greater and stronger focus on the industries, on the control over nature and over the infrastructures. And yet, there is a very big distrust about the entertainment internet. In addition to that, there is a very strong belief in the benefits of different access to information, in the Chinese model. Thus, certain parts of the party and of the State have access to all the information. While, some other parts have limited access to information.

Therefore, transparency is not seen as a value. To summarize, they have a certain constellation of values which was, in fact, aggressively put to use during the pandemic. We even watched Chinese diplomats pointing to the situation in the United States, trying to argue that what happened in the United States during the pandemic shows that the Chinese model is superior, once it gets better results due to the concentration of power, its ability of making decisions and, because there is an idea of a collective duty to follow those decisions. Finally, all this without being the Soviet model. Although, of course, I do not think it is the Western model either. Nor is there in China the objective of converging on the Western model.

Therefore, it seems to me that we entered into a rivalry of models and ideas, which, despite being different from the Cold War, has, in fact, this aspect as well. So, it is not purely an economic competition, from my point of view.





**OLIVER:** Excellent question, that someone made and it has been very well voted. It is about the fact that the countries are increasingly adopting a more competitive and self-centered mentality. In other words, it seems that there will be increasingly less room for cooperation. In this sense, “How to establish spaces for cooperation?”, and “Can developing countries like Brazil, for example, maintain some degree of neutrality and have good relations both with the United States and Europe, but also with China?” or “Will they be forced to choose a side at some point?” I think this is a question that many countries in the Global South are asking themselves at this moment.



**BRUNO:** This is maybe the question which I receive more often when I visit other countries, both before the pandemic and now, in the trips that are starting. For example, this is a question that I heard many times in Singapore. And, indeed it is a fundamental question there, at this point. Besides that, it is a question that we hear a lot in Kazakhstan and also, interestingly, in Switzerland.

Despite this country not being part of NATO or OTAN, as we say in Portugal. But it is a country very connected to the Western and has a trade treaty with China. Moreover, I believe this question might be asked very often in Brazil. Then, what is usually my answer? I believe we would make a mistake if we think of the Cold War model, between the Western and Soviet Union. In this case, there was a very complete alignment with one of the blocks. The non-aligned bloc was never particularly influential or powerful. And yet, there was an enormous pressure over the countries to choose a side to be aligned with. However, I do not see the same thing happening at this point.

And, it seems to me, that the differences are obvious. Because in the Cold War case, many countries were leaving the colonization period. So, their structures were still weak and it was not possible to even consider the idea of enjoying a level of autonomy and independence in face of the large blocks. On the other hand, this is not the case now. The powers of the United States and China are much more diluted in a world order in which there are other relevant powers. Hence, it does not seem to be possible that China or the United States would organize the world into two blocks. I believe that the most that China and the United States can do, what they aspire to – namely, their ambition – is actually, in many cases, to prevent certain strategic countries from being controlled by its rival.

In this sense, it will be very important for both China and the United States, that Singapore, for instance, is not entirely aligned with only one side. Likewise, it is important for both China and the United States, that Brazil is not entirely aligned with only one side. And if that is the attitude, whether from the United States or China, I believe this will open a huge space for the countries to become truly autonomous. Once this way, they will be able to satisfy the essential priorities of both Washington and Beijing.

Evidently, a second question arises, which is whether countries want to be autonomous. Because, in many cases, due to reasons related to their history, tradition and values, the obvious and immediate solution, namely, the one that their public opinion demands, is to be more aligned particularly with the United States. We have seen this a lot in the case of European countries, which have made this choice deliberately and in a democratic way. However, in other cases, I am not going to talk specifically about Brazil's orientation, but in other cases, there will be much more interest in keeping a certain level of Strategic Autonomy.

In this sense, Brazil traditionally has this ability in the economic, political and cultural fields. Although, it does not have, traditionally, this ability in the military area. But it also does not need it. And, because of this, it seems to me that, if that is the choice of the Brazilians, this model is still very open to the countries which want to choose.



**OLIVER:** Well, we have some hope in face of this very challenging picture. It also always seems very interesting to notice that the country is in this process of adapting to this much more multipolar world, in face of a reality which we do not know very well about in Asia yet. Thus, we will have to acquire much more knowledge about these more traditional actors. And, this will be a long process ahead of us.

We have many great questions. And, one of them, which I particularly like, is about the adaptation process of the post-pandemic world. We are now in this process of getting back to the on-site/face-to-face work. Then, there is a very complex and interesting debate between the individual needs and freedom and the public responsibilities. Some countries can adapt relatively well, others not so much. Therefore, there is an immense danger of a greater social chasm or more inequality both within countries, but also between countries in this post pandemic world. Since some developing countries, for example, will find it much more difficult to adapt to this new situation. While some countries do much better. So, I ask you, “What is your expectation regarding it? Do you believe that inequality will increase in this context?”



**BRUNO:** The inequality has been increasing within the countries. And, I believe that the technological acceleration which I was talking about, has the capacity to increase the inequality within the countries. Once we know that, the fast technological development tends to increase inequality. And I believe that is exactly what is going to happen. At global level, maybe less than we expected. For instance, in the beginning of the pandemic, there was a huge concern about the consequences to the developing world, in particular to Africa.

On the other hand, there was a huge complacency about the consequences of the pandemic to the Western developed world. And, one of the shocks was to see that, actually, the Western world was not exactly prepared for it. To a large extent, because the Western world was never convinced that the pandemic could be a problem. For example, I have a very vivid memory that, until March or April of 2020, the idea in Europe was that this kind of thing used to happen in China or in Iran. And it was very tragic.

But it would never happen in Europe. Therefore, there was a huge complacency. And also, what I believe is the most important thing, there was a sudden discovery that our structures in the Western world are extremely rigid and difficult to adapt. On the other hand, we saw, interestingly, that developing countries were able to adapt more quickly to the pandemic. Because their societies and their states are more recent, so they still have the flexibility of their origins. Or even due, in fact, particularly in Africa, to the fact that an experience, like the pandemic, was not something new in that region.

In other words, the scenario of being permanently subject to the uncertainty of some disease or a natural disaster, is something recurring on that continent. Because of this, those societies, in many cases, had a greater resilience. The cases which were considered successful in facing the pandemic were, curiously, democratic societies, which were not created many decades ago. Namely, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, with their democratic elements, although Singapore is not a democracy.

But these are societies in which it is still possible to adapt and react quickly. Besides that, there is no excessive consolidation nor stiffness of the social and state structures. This shows that many of our beliefs were wrong, about the consequences at the level of the global distribution of power. Moreover, it seems to me much more possible today that the pandemic has even accelerated a certain redistribution of power at a global level. Contrary to what we thought at first.



**OLIVER:** It was really a privilege to have questions from the participants. And, it was also a privilege to have you here, Bruno. Thank you very much!

