

The Crossroads of Global Leadership and Governance: An Economic and Humanitarian Argument For Peace and Why Scholars Everywhere Should Support It

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The world is at a pivotal moment, facing unprecedented challenges that threaten both economic stability and fundamental humanitarian values. These challenges—ranging from global conflicts and environmental degradation to the displacement of millions—underscore the urgent need for a new paradigm in leadership and governance. At the heart of this crisis lies the concept of the commons: resources, whether tangible or intangible, that are shared by communities and vital to their well-being. While the "tragedy of the commons" has long been viewed as inevitable, Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom's groundbreaking research demonstrated that effective governance, leadership, and factors like social capital can foster cooperation and preserve shared resources. This insight is crucial to understanding how we can protect not only natural resources but also what is referred to as the "social commons," such as healthcare, social capital, and global economic well-being.

As we grapple with rising instability, the failure of leadership and governance to protect the commons has become painfully evident. Leaders who prioritize personal or short-term interests over the collective well-being of humanity have left the global social commons vulnerable, imposing immense costs on the world. The time has come to rethink the role of leadership and governance in the 21st century. We must hold leaders accountable and have governing institutions, whose members are committed to public service, that protect the commons and reinforce global standards of justice, many of which are already stipulated in various international accords, declarations, and laws. As we all know, laws are one thing, enforcing them is another. Although the cynic may dismiss these arguments as unrealistic, a counterargument would be that it is unrealistic to think we can continue without advancing on this front.

A simple example illustrates why the commons, upon which we all depend, need governance, and this is a universal requirement applicable to all levels. Cities contain households, but the extensive network of city streets and highways is a form of social commons. No single household or individual owns them, but collectively, these roadways support a tremendous volume of activity, sustaining both individual and collective economic activity. However, the city's residents can only use these commons if applicable rules and enforcement are in place to govern their use. Having a driver's license, an operable and registered vehicle, paying taxes, and auto insurance are all part of the price that each individual pays to access these com-

mons. Law enforcement and a system of courts to adjudicate infractions are also necessary. Together, this system of governance sustains this commons of infrastructure for everyone's use. Almost no one debates this arrangement, and the collective benefits are clear.

Even radical groups like the Islamic State and the Taliban have discovered that once they have taken control of populated territories, they immediately must tend to the practical realities of collecting trash, continuing services for sewage and sanitation, running court systems, and keeping the roads functioning. These are the necessary arrangements for collective use, and every nation on earth, regardless of form of government, has some system of this type. Both rules and enforcement are necessary to make social systems sustainable, and this is also one of the key findings from Ostrom's legacy of research.

In an interconnected world, the world beyond our own doorstep also matters to our well-being. Just as a city is comprised of households, the nations of our world and international commerce depend on the orderliness of the global commons. Our own companies, organizations, and nations, within their borders, are dominated by the short-term, but the long-term concerns of everyone are housed within the commons. Leaders and managers, if they are competent, act according to both short-term and long-term concerns. Today, it is undeniable that the planet is now an extensive, integrated social system. We have international supply chains, interconnected financial systems, and navigation and communication satellites circling the globe. The corresponding structures of governance are also needed, and we are gradually, and to be frank, inexorably being drawn into creating them. This process has both reactive and proactive components.

On the proactive front, it begins with those at the forefront of knowledge fields who grasp the implications of their discoveries. They recognize the need for rules and governance as essential to maintaining the safety and integrity of the social commons. We should reflect that this occurred to those discovering the power of nuclear fission, to those unlocking the power of biological weapons and diseases, to those constructing information technology networks that carry the world's financial and personal data, to the early creators of social media networks, to the scientists unlocking our ability to architect our own genes through CRISPR, and now with the explosive proliferation of artificial intelligence. To whatever degree we choose wisely and listen to those at the forefront of discovery, it is also inevitable that we will play "catch-up"

once they are implemented to fill needed gaps in cooperation, rules, and enforcement. There is a clear pattern of proactive thought and the creation of frameworks, followed by the maturation of the framework through reactive response as additional needs are identified in practice.

As examples, think of a sample of institutions that have emerged to protect the global social commons: we have now the International Atomic Energy Agency (to counter nuclear proliferation), the IMF and World Bank Group (which assist in international development but also responded to the global financial crisis of 2008-2009), the Paris Accords (as a response to global climate change impacts), the World Health Organization (which helped in the world's response to the COVID pandemic) and INTERPOL and U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, among other agencies that are continuously engaged in the global fight against cybercrime and criminal networks. We have been drawn into these arrangements out of pure necessity. The time has come for a wider acceptance of the need for collective security, governance, and accountability, also to protect the global commons.

Humanity is only at an early point in understanding ourselves as a social species and the mature responsibilities of life in a global civilization. We still live in a system open to an ethos of "might makes right" used by individual nations that can impose their will on the commons. It has been an unstated prerogative of a true superpower to be capable of engaging in this behavior. However, there is wisdom in recognizing that the best use of power, which history has shown to be a temporary condition for all nations, is the establishment of sound foundations for long-term prosperity.

The geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea are essentially a battle between the rule of law regarding international waters (itself a form of commons), and the Chinese government's argument that, based on their current power and need, they can now act in isolated self-interest within their region, regardless of previously established maritime limits. Implicit in this conflict is a potentially momentous fork in the road for the global community: to follow the rule of established law or continue the path of historical precedent, where, with a nod and a wink, "real" superpowers get to do as they wish. Chinese leaders have witnessed a history of self-interested actions by the most powerful nations, and they are now members of the elite club of superpowers. Regardless of which path the collective leaders of governments choose, having a global commons open to disruptive acts of isolated self-interest has been the source of all our major wars. Current practices within leadership and governance confound choices and exacerbate the situation. These practices for leaders include excessive power-seeking and the over-personalization of power. The paradox for both leadership and governance is that they are also ground zero for alleviating current conditions; it is a matter of how they are practiced.

Leadership needed in the 21st century must focus on protecting the social commons and prioritizing long-term,

collective well-being over individual and short-term gains. Three frameworks of thought and action are constructive in these times. Adaptive leadership, as described by scholars such as Ronald Heifetz and others, offers a robust framework that emphasizes collaboration, transparency, and the ability to navigate complex, systemic challenges over time by addressing their root causes. This is the opposite of chasing symptoms, and the type of leadership focused on temporary advantages and cheap wins that often exacerbate situations. Interestingly, scholars of adaptive leadership have defined a phenomenon they call counterfeit leadership, which occurs when leaders convince their followers that they alone have the answers, cleverly point to symptoms, and distract their followers from undertaking the real adaptive work of addressing root causes. Systems thinking is another powerful framework that uncovers patterns of undesired effects that frustratingly reoccur despite decision-makers' best efforts. Experience shows that the insights needed to address systemic problems require higher forms of collaboration and communication than are currently practiced. Resolving these difficulties can only be done through rigorous, deeper examination and a collective learning approach. Another curative framework is servant-leadership. Servant leadership embodies the moral and ethical values that are emphasized in most business schools, including the stakeholder perspective and consideration of societal impact. This is an ethos demonstrated by the very best national leaders and one that is directly violated by the worst. We note that the "commons" that modern scholars say require protection necessitate a more holistic viewpoint, the ability to think and act systemically, to consider the views of various stakeholders, and to consider the well-being of the whole, rather than solely in win-lose terms. These criteria are inherent to and consistent across all three frameworks above, which can be taught, applied comprehensively, and practiced in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Though the frameworks above are fairly modern, their behaviors and wisdom are not without precedent. History provides examples of leadership that served the long-term interests of the commons and examples that did otherwise. The difference in the modern age is that we have not yet applied the lessons that history provides. Gandhi in India and Atatürk in Turkey acted with a vision to uplift their nations and protect the welfare of their citizens, often at personal risk. In contrast, leaders such as Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot prioritized personal power and ideology over the well-being of their people, leaving legacies marked by great destruction and loss as the price of their leadership. Each was respectively responsible for mass murder in purges that occurred in Soviet Russia, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and Cambodia's Killing Fields. These examples underscore not only the desired behaviors in our leaders but also the critical role of governance in providing bounds to leaders' behaviors and ensuring accountability. Effective governance, in turn, requires strong, independent institutions—such as a free press, impartial judiciaries, and legislative bodies—that act as checks on individual leaders. Without strong institutions,

the commons—both social and economic—will remain vulnerable to exploitation.

History offers another cautionary insight. It teaches that the conflicting aims of leaders can unnecessarily set nations at odds. Despite the narrow focus of the accrued benefits, the costs are always steep and paid by the population. During World War II, for example, the rhetoric of military ambition masked the underlying truth: the average German or Japanese citizen had no inherent conflict with their British or American counterparts. However, a visit to the massive cemeteries in Normandy, France, and Arlington, Virginia, shows that the soldiers buried there, by and large, came from ordinary homes and families. This is a key lesson repeated throughout history: leaders and governments invariably initiate wars, but the ledger of who pays and who benefits remains the same. In the aftermath of war, trade and cooperation ultimately prevailed, as evident in the close alliances between former adversaries such as Germany, Japan, and the United States today. With better thinking and a deeper understanding of past mistakes, perhaps we can avoid the pain of such losses and foster greater cooperation and economic growth.

There are also arrangements between leadership and governance that also need to be recognized and thoughtfully considered today. Less than five years after World War II, a war began on the Korean peninsula, with two competing ideologies of governance and leadership locked in a bloody contest for power. Again, a peasant south of the 38th parallel had much in common with one to the north, and on a person-to-person basis, had no fundamental reason to wage war against his neighbor. Yet, the peninsula was split and became an informal experiment for the rest of the world. Today, we see an economically prosperous South Korea, whose leadership is constrained by relatively independent institutions. There are certainly ongoing political problems and issues, but the economic gains and prosperity created over the past 70 years are indisputable. Compare this leadership and governance with those of its neighbor. In the North, a long-term dynasty is in place, with national institutions that reinforce the leader's god-like status and personal power. There is central domination by a few, and the population fears the regime's all-reaching power. The social commons of that nation are depleted (including its economy), and many citizens live in dire poverty. It is, in brief, an Orwellian dystopia, and this is no exaggeration. To the world, it presents a stark contrast to its southern neighbor, despite sharing a common ethnicity and language.

In summary, the lesson from the two Koreas is that individual leaders should operate within the context provided by national institutions, which in turn safeguard the nation's general well-being. The corollary is also true: the general well-being and the functioning of institutions should not be sacrificed to maintain the centralized power of a single leader. This appears to be a recipe for long-term ruin, as seen in both Koreas and many other examples throughout the world.

These lessons are just as relevant today. In Russia in 2025, a citizen in Moscow has no reason to kill or harm a citizen of Ukraine, nor to abduct Ukrainian children and force them to live in Russia. The Russian citizen does not benefit from these actions, and no ideology can justify them. There has also been a tremendous loss of life for the average Russian. Reports are that as of spring of 2025, nearly 1,000,000 Russian soldiers have either died or been wounded supporting the war (De Luce, 2025). It will be for Russians of another time to judge these actions and whether they furthered their long-term national interests. If the lessons of history hold, when they think of Ukrainian suffering, they will likely become a source of shame and regret to the average Russian.

And then there is the global commons to consider: In 2025, the war in Ukraine continues to exact a terrible toll on the worldwide economy. According to the OECD, this war alone imposed an estimated global cost of over \$2.8 trillion in 2022, reflected in higher energy prices, disrupted supply chains, and inflation (Norman, 2022). Ukrainian refugees and migrants often strain the resources of host nations while being unable to contribute to the economy of their home country. Further, in an interconnected world, citizens in one country bear the expenses caused by leaders on the other side of the globe. Strong governance and accountable leadership are essential to preventing such conflicts and protecting the global commons for future generations.

The case for protecting the global commons is every bit a humanitarian and moral issue as well. As uncomfortable as it is to consider, millions of displaced people worldwide represent an indirect moral burden for those enjoying relative peace and prosperity elsewhere. In a world that benefits from greater economic interdependence and technological connections, we see images of people and their conditions in other parts of the world. Americans might reflect that in our own civil rights struggles of the 1960s, it was the emotion-stirring images of the National Guard's response to people crossing the bridge in Selma that were a turning point in mainstream sentiment towards the movement. For leaders and governments in the modern age, geographically distant places are now accessible through smartphone technology. Witness the response after the death of George Floyd: communities across the world, from Brazil to France, responded with demonstrations against the crime committed on an American street by one of its public servants. Such protests should not be dismissed as inconveniences to leadership; they are rooted in morality and often serve as sparks of consciousness that point out needed change. These are deeper, adaptive issues requiring leaders with the character and skill to engage a wider array of stakeholders.

Beyond such immediate realities, the long-term impact on human capital of our chaotic global commons is devastating. Generations of children growing up in refugee camps are denied education and opportunities, creating a cycle of poverty and instability. Protecting the social commons—ensuring stability, opportunity, and order—is

essential not just for moral reasons but for the sustainable growth and prosperity of nations. Leadership and governance must prioritize these shared interests over individual or national ambitions. This is both a moral and economic imperative, one that requires serious thought and collective action.

Scholars of behavioral and applied management are uniquely positioned to address the challenges facing the global commons. Your research, teaching, and community engagement can provide the insights necessary to rethink leadership and governance structures for the 21st century. Among the most urgent tasks is developing frameworks that hold leaders accountable for their impact on the global commons while promoting systems that incentivize long-term, collective well-being over short-term, individual gain. Scholars can further research by integrating these ideas into curricula, applying them in interdisciplinary research, and engaging with policymakers and organizational leaders to advocate for systemic change.

The stakes could not be higher. Our shared economic and social futures depend on protecting the commons from the disruptions of bad actors and shortsighted governance. This journal, and its readership, have a vital role to play in advancing the dialogue and solutions necessary to meet this challenge. By contributing scholarly insights that bridge theory and practice, we can help create a framework for leadership and governance that safeguards our shared resources and fosters a more stable, prosperous world. While peace may not be a guaranteed outcome, the protection of the commons is a prerequisite for human progress and prosperity. Let us rise to this challenge together.

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