

Systemic contributions to global catastrophic risk

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Non-technical summary

We live in a time of significant global risk. Some research has focused on understanding systemic sources of this risk, while other research has focused on possible worst-case outcomes. In this article we bring together these two areas of research, and provide a simple conceptual framework which shows how emergent features of the global system contribute to the risk of global catastrophe.

Technical summary

Humanity faces a complex and dangerous global risk landscape, and many different terms and concepts have been used to make sense of it. One broad strand of research characterises how risk emerges within the complex global system, using concepts like systemic risk, Anthropocene risk, synchronous failure, negative social tipping points, and polycrisis. Another focuses on possible worst-case outcomes, using concepts like global catastrophic risk (GCR), existential risk, and extinction risk. Despite their clear relevance to each other, connections between these two strands remain limited. Here we provide a simple conceptual framework which synthesises these research strands and shows how emergent properties of the global system contribute to the risk of global catastrophic outcomes. In particular, we show that much GCR stems from the interaction of hazards and vulnerabilities which arise endogenously within the global system, and how “systems thinking” and complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory can help illuminate this. We also highlight some unique challenges which systemic sources of GCR pose for risk assessment and mitigation, discuss insights for policy, and outline potential paths forward.

Social media summary

The global system is generating global catastrophic risk.

1. Introduction

Understanding and reducing global catastrophic risk (GCR) is vital. We define GCR as the risk¹ of a catastrophic loss of life and wellbeing on a global scale, with the death of 10% or more of the current human population (Cotton-Barratt et al., 2016; Kemp et al., 2022) as a useful non-prescriptive anchoring point in terms of magnitude. Subcategories of GCR include the risk of human extinction (extinction risk), the risk of global societal collapse (collapse risk), and the risk of a wider set of catastrophes judged to be of a similar magnitude as human extinction (existential risk);² meanwhile, GCR is itself a subcategory of “global risk” more broadly. There is a large body of work on GCR,³ focusing for example on asteroid impacts (Baum, 2023; Mani et al., 2023), large-magnitude volcanic eruptions (Cassidy & Mani, 2022), anthropogenic climate change (Beard et al., 2021; Kemp et al., 2022), biological threats (Millett & Snyder-Beattie, 2017; Musunuri et al., 2021; Schoch-Spana et al., 2017), nuclear war (Sagan 1983; Robock 2010; Baum and Barrett 2018; Scouras 2019), and advanced artificial intelligence (Bengio et al., 2025; Gruetzemacher & Whittlestone, 2022; Hendrycks et al., 2023; Russell, 2019).

While these drivers are often studied in isolation, they arise as part of a complex interconnected global risk landscape. Effectively, human activities have coalesced into a vast global system involving the worldwide exchange of goods, people, information, and ideas (Centeno et al., 2015; Ellis, 2015; Goldin & Mariathan, 2014; Helbing, 2013), which relies on underlying connective infrastructure (physical, digital, cultural and economic). This brings with it many benefits, but also new global hazards, vulnerabilities, and possible undesirable outcomes. Many terms and concepts have been used to describe aspects of this phenomenon, including (global) systemic risk (Centeno et al., 2015; Renn et al., 2017; Sillmann et al., 2022), compound risk (Kruczkiewicz et al., 2021), synchronous failure (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015), Anthropocene risk (Keys et al., 2019), femtorisk (Frank et al., 2014), hyper-risk (Helbing, 2013), negative social tipping points (Juhola et al., 2022; Spaiser et al., 2024), and polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024; Tooze, 2021). Such work typically focuses on catastrophes of a smaller scale than those considered in the study of GCR.

In this article we bring together these two strands of work — on GCR and worst-case outcomes, and on how risk emerges within the complex global system. To sharpen our focus slightly, we ground our understanding of the latter strand of research in “systems thinking” and the theory of complex adaptive systems (CASs), which much of the work cited in the previous paragraph explicitly or implicitly draws from. For convenience, we will refer to this work as “the work on emergent global risk”. This does not mean that we limit our view exclusively to systems thinking and CAS perspectives; rather, we use them as framing

¹ While “risk” may be conceived of in a number of different ways (SRA, 2018), here we follow previous work on GCR in focusing on the potential occurrence of certain undesirable outcomes.

² Although specifics vary, this is the general idea underpinning much of the scholarship on existential risk to humanity (Greaves, 2024). This means that even defining existential risk requires one to make value judgments: how bad are different possible outcomes when compared to human extinction? In this article we will avoid the term “existential risk”, focusing instead on GCR, extinction risk, and collapse risk. For discussions of some of the normative issues from different perspectives, we refer the reader to works by Ord (2020), Cremer & Kemp (2024), and Greaves (2024). For discussion of the concept of existential risk applied at different scales (e.g. individuals, communities, or states), see Huggel et al., (2022).

³ For an overview of this work and how it has developed over time, see Beard & Hobson (2024) and Jehn et al. (2024).

devices to help draw out general insights and cut an already challenging task (synthesising work on GCR with other work on global risk and the complex global system) down to a slightly more manageable size.

We proceed as follows. First, we introduce key ideas from systems thinking and CAS theory. Next, we define the “global system”, discuss why the concept is useful, and review existing work on emergent global risk. Then, we provide a simple conceptual framework for understanding what we term *systemic contributions to global catastrophic risk*. Its aim is not only to help us better understand GCR, but also to facilitate connections between the existing work on GCR and that on emergent global risk. Beyond this framework, we also highlight some unique challenges that systemic sources of GCR pose for risk assessment and mitigation. We conclude by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of our approach, as well as potential paths forward.

2. A systemic understanding of global risk

2.1 What is “systems thinking” and why does it matter for global risk?

“Systems thinking” recognises that a system is more than the sum of its parts (Meadows, 2008): its behaviour is emergent, and cannot be predicted purely from its constituent components.⁴ More specifically, the theory of complex adaptive systems (CASs) describes systems in which patterns and adaptive behaviours at higher levels emerge from localised interactions and selection at lower levels (Holland, 1995; Levin et al., 2013; Levin, 1998; Miller & Page, 2009). Examples of CASs include ecosystems (Levin, 1998), social systems (Miller & Page, 2009), economies (Arthur, 2021; Levin et al., 2013), food systems (Chapman et al., 2017), infrastructure systems (Oughton et al., 2018), social-ecological systems more broadly (Levin et al., 2013; Preiser et al., 2018), and the Earth’s entire biosphere (Folke et al., 2021; Levin, 1998). CASs can behave in highly nonlinear ways: large changes can have small effects, small changes can have large effects, and disruptions in one part of the system can cascade into other parts. Broadly, systems thinking allows us to make sense of such behaviours; this matters for global risk and GCR because many of the systems that humans exist within and depend on (Avin et al., 2018) are complex adaptive systems (see also Section 2.2).

Our usage of “complex” here is not synonymous with “complicated” (Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020; Miller & Page, 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007; UNDRR, 2019). A system can be complicated but not complex: this is the case if it is intricate and difficult to understand, but still largely comprehensible based on its component parts and predictable relationships between them (i.e. emergent system properties do not play an important role). A useful example of such a system is a jet engine (Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020).

Much emergent behaviour in systems can be described using the language of feedbacks. Feedbacks occur when the state of a system affects (feeds back on) the state of that same system, either directly or indirectly. Mathematically positive feedbacks (+) are destabilising (a given change causes more of that change to occur)

⁴Throughout this article we use the term “emergent” primarily in this sense: to refer to phenomena that arise at the level of an entire system due to behaviours and interactions occurring at a smaller scale within the system.

and mathematically negative feedbacks (-) are stabilising (the effects of a given change can be damped out). This is summarised in Figure 1, using “causal loop” and “stability landscape” diagrams. Both kinds of feedbacks can have desirable and undesirable effects: stabilising feedbacks can preserve desirable system states but also trap systems in undesirable states, while destabilising feedbacks can drive runaway evolution to desirable or undesirable system states. Most systems of interest contain multiple feedbacks, which can change in strength depending on external or internal factors, and can lead to sudden shifts in system behaviour (for example when an equilibrium state changes stability).

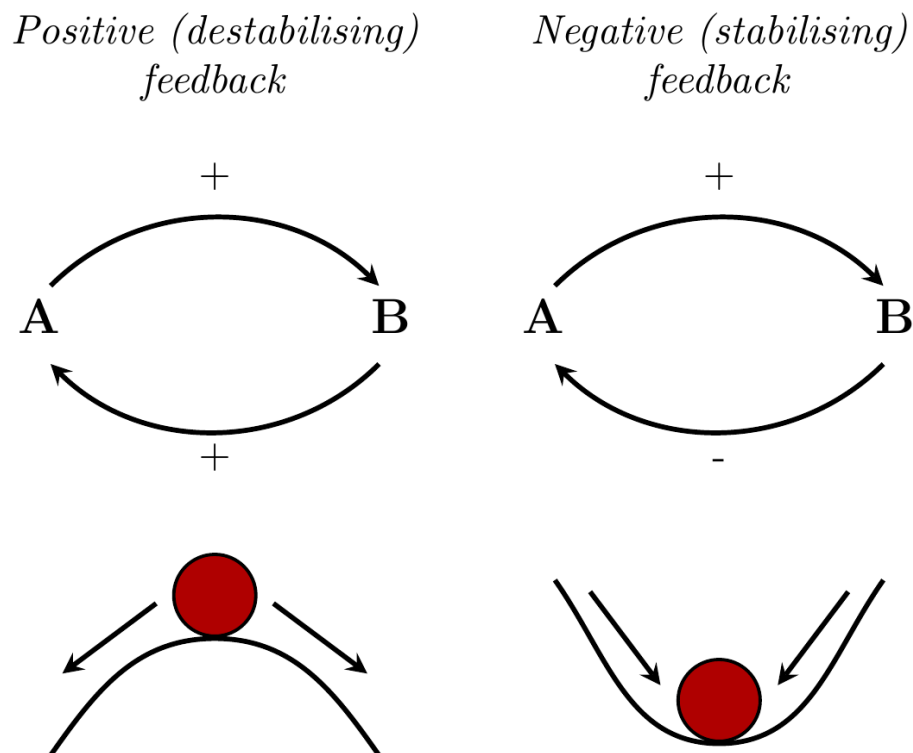


Figure 1: Summary of destabilising (mathematically positive) and stabilising (mathematically negative) feedbacks. In causal loop diagrams (top row), an arrow with a + symbol means that a change in the first variable causes the second variable to change in the same direction (e.g. an increase in A causes an increase in B), and an arrow with a - symbol means that a change in the first variable causes the second variable to change in the opposite direction (e.g. an increase in A causes a decrease in B). In stability landscape diagrams (bottom row), the state of the system is conceived of as a ball rolling on a landscape (collapsing the high-dimensional state spaces of the real world onto a single dimension). When destabilising feedbacks dominate, we see runaway change (rolling down the hill); when stabilising feedbacks dominate, the system remains within a stable equilibrium (the valley, or “basin of attraction”).

Another valuable concept for understanding CAS dynamics is that of resilience. While early work characterised resilience simply as the size of the system’s current basin of attraction (Holling, 1973; Scheffer et al., 2001), Walker et al. (2004) define it more qualitatively as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks”. Resilience is deeply related to adaptability (the capacity of a system to adjust its responses based on changing conditions) and transformability (the capacity to transform the

stability landscape to become a new kind of system); critically, maintaining system identity at large scales under changing conditions may require radical system transformations at smaller scales (Folke et al., 2010).

This understanding of resilience as a dynamic property involving transformation and reorganization naturally leads us to consider how such changes unfold over time. One theoretical framework that explicitly addresses these temporal dynamics is adaptive cycle theory (Gunderson & Holling, 2002). Building on examples from ecology, this highlights that many systems undergo a cycle of: exploitation, in which there is rapid expansion of agents or strategies into new areas; conservation, in which resources slowly accumulate and the system becomes more interconnected and rigid; release, in which the rigid interconnected system fails and collapses; and reorganisation, in which the system is restructured and new kinds of agents or strategies arise. In practice, systems may exhibit a “panarchy” of nested adaptive cycles on a range of scales (Allen et al., 2014; Gunderson et al., 2022; Gunderson & Holling, 2002).

2.2 The global system

To see how systems thinking can inform our understanding of global risk, it is worth developing a notion of “the global system”. By the “global system” we mean the globally interconnected system of human economic, social, political, and cultural relations, including humans themselves, material flows, and the extraction of materials from the broader Earth system. Our conceptualisation draws from both world-systems theory in the social sciences (Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 1995) and from Earth system science, where the global system has been labelled the “Anthroposphere” (Steffen et al., 2020). While the global system is a subsystem of the Earth system, the boundaries are fuzzy: the two systems have substantially shaped one another (Ellis, 2015; Frankopan, 2023; Nyström et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2015). The global system is a CAS, and so are many of its subsystems.

Why is this concept useful? For our purposes, there are two main reasons. First, by identifying a single global system within which most humans are embedded and upon which most humans rely, we can recognise that this system mediates almost all global catastrophic risk.⁵ This is an important insight. Early work on GCR often treated risk as essentially synonymous to hazard: the risk *of* an asteroid impact, or the risk *of* dangerous climate change. But this neglects the important role played by vulnerability: how will the global system respond when stressed by a hazard? Foregrounding this can drastically change our understanding of GCR.

Second, identifying the global system as a CAS informs us that it will display emergent phenomena, such as nonlinear behaviour, path dependence, feedbacks, and cascading failures. We need to understand these phenomena to understand and mitigate global risk.

We will occasionally find it convenient to refer to the global system as a single entity which, for example, “creates”, “generates”, or “amplifies” various drivers of risk. This is meant neither to anthropomorphise the global system nor to suggest that all parts of the global system are equally responsible for the phenomenon being discussed. It is also not intended to remove culpability or agency from individual actors, such as

⁵ There are a small number of exceptions: one example is the risk posed by naturally occurring exotic physics scenarios such as vacuum collapse (Tegmark & Bostrom, 2005).

people, states, or corporations. As one illustrative example, in the case of climate change, it is simultaneously true that a small number of companies conduct the fossil fuel extraction leading to the vast majority of carbon dioxide emissions (Carbon Majors, 2024; Heede, 2014), that these companies exist within a global system within which it is highly profitable to extract and sell fossil fuels, and that the demand for the energy produced ultimately derives from the constrained choices of billions of individual human beings.

2.3 Emergent global risk: a wide array of concepts

In this section we review some of the many concepts used to describe how risk emerges from the complex global system. A natural starting point is with “systemic risk”. Early definitions of the term (Kaufman & Scott, 2003; OECD, 2003) emphasised the risk of failure in an entire system, as opposed to failures in some of its components. Subsequent work has emphasised the risk of smaller disruptions being amplified, for example due to nonlinearity, interconnectedness, and cascading failure (Centeno et al., 2015; May et al., 2008; Renn et al., 2017, 2022; Sillmann et al., 2022). The concepts of “global systemic risk” (Centeno et al., 2015; Renn et al., 2017) and “hyper-risks” (Helbing, 2013), apply these ideas specifically to the global system. Even more specifically, the concept of “femtorisk” focuses on the systemic risk due to “the actions and interactions of actors existing beneath the level of formal institutions, often operating outside effective governance structures” (Frank et al., 2014).

There is a wider set of related and often overlapping concepts from risk analysis, including compound risk, interacting risk, interconnected risk, and cascading risk (Pescaroli & Alexander, 2018). Although discussion of the nuances is beyond the scope of this section, we do note that the concept of compound risk — the risk of disasters involving multiple simultaneously occurring hazards (Pescaroli & Alexander, 2018; Zscheischler et al., 2018, 2020) — has recently been applied more broadly to global systems in light of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kruczkiewicz et al., 2021). If the co-occurring hazards cause more damage together than had they occurred separately, this is precisely an instance of nonlinear amplification — a key characteristic of CASs.

The global system also interacts with the global environment to produce risk. Human actions are by far the dominant driver of global environmental change (Ellis, 2015), and could trigger a wide range of ecological and environmental tipping points (Armstrong McKay et al., 2022; Barnosky et al., 2012; Lenton et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2023). One useful conceptual framework here is that of “Anthropocene risks” (Keys et al., 2019), which are described as originating from anthropogenic Earth system change, emerging due to the evolution of globally intertwined social-ecological systems, and involving complex cross-scale interactions.

A separate and emerging body of work applies the concept of tipping points — where a small change can have a large, abrupt, self-perpetuating, and hard-to-reverse impact — to the context of negative social change (Juhola et al., 2022; Spaiser et al., 2024).⁶ Such “negative social tipping points” are another way to understand the nonlinear creation of risk in the global system. While the focus thus far has been on stresses from anthropogenic climate change, this does not need to remain the case: tipping points in the global system could be triggered by a wide range of factors.

⁶ For a critical analysis of how the “tipping point” concept has been used in different communities over time, see Van der Hel et al. (2018); for a recent critique of how it has been applied in social contexts, see Milkoreit (2023).

The subject of negative social tipping points leads us straightforwardly to collapse. Societal collapse (Brozović, 2023; Centeno et al., 2023; Tainter, 1988) likely involves interacting nonlinear processes (e.g. tipping) within the system itself (Centeno et al., 2022; Cumming & Peterson, 2017; Homer-Dixon, 2006; Juhola et al., 2022; Lenton, 2023). There is a natural intersection between the study of collapse and the study of GCR and worst-case outcomes (see e.g. Belfield, 2023). Global collapse is an important form of global catastrophe. A collapse is usually preceded by a crisis (Butzer, 2012).

The “synchronous failure” framework (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015) offers a more specific causal description of how crises emerge in the modern global system. The authors first identify three important global trends: the scale of human activity, increased connectivity, and reduced diversity. They then argue that these trends favour three specific “process archetypes” — “long fuse big bang”, “simultaneous stresses”, and “ramifying cascade” — which interact within and across systems to produce global crises. These archetypes are relevant not just for the modern global system, but have also been applied historically, for example to the Late Bronze Age Collapse (Kemp & Cline, 2022)

Finally, the concept of polycrisis captures the general idea that the world’s crises are coinciding and converging into a whole worse than the sum of its parts (Lawrence et al., 2024; Morin & Kern, 1999; Tooze, 2021). Lawrence et al. (2024) offer a more specific definition: global polycrisis is the “causal entanglement of global crises in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects”. They describe this entanglement by distinguishing between stresses, triggers, and crises (see Section 5.2), and considering how these interact within and across systems. In this article, we typically use “polycrisis” to refer to this specific conceptual framework.

3. Systemic contributions to GCR: a conceptual framework

With these foundations in place, we now provide a conceptual framework⁷ for understanding *systemic contributions to GCR*. In other words, how do emergent “systemic” phenomena within the global system contribute to the creation of GCR? The purpose of the framework is twofold: to provide insight into how GCR is created (although it is not a complete causal model), and to facilitate connections between existing work on GCR and on emergent global risk.

We conceptualise GCR as created by the interaction of *hazards* with *vulnerabilities* (Figure 2). Here, we define hazards as the proximal events and processes which could lead to undesirable outcomes. They can come from outside of the global system (e.g. asteroid impacts) or emerge within the global system (e.g. climate change, nuclear weapons, advanced artificial intelligence). Critically, many of the most salient hazards in the context of GCR emerge within the global system, and this is the focus of Section 3.1.

⁷ We understand a “conceptual framework” to be a set of ideas that connects different concepts in order to facilitate understanding and structure inquiry (Cumming, 2014; Jabareen, 2009; Partelow, 2023), with much of the value of a framework lying in what its goals are and how well they are achieved (Cumming, 2014).

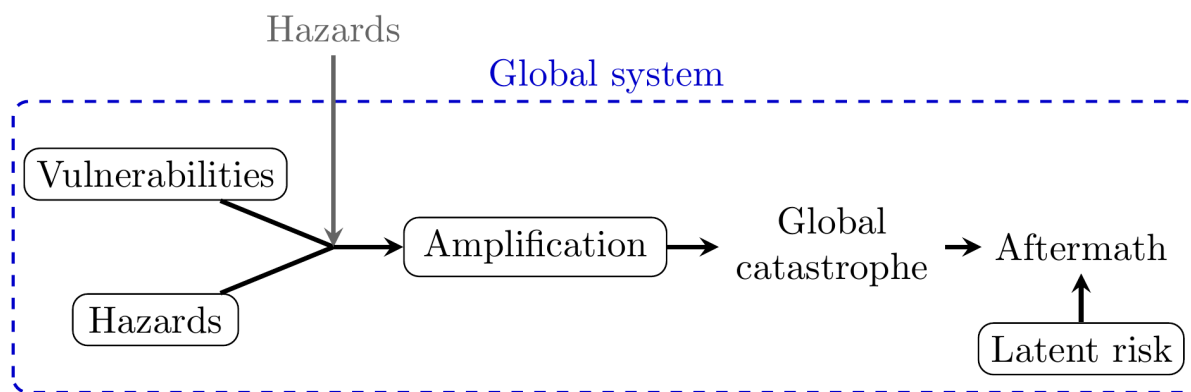


Figure 2: Key elements of our conceptual framework for understanding systemic contributions to global catastrophic risk. *Hazards*, whether from outside of the global system (e.g. asteroids, volcanic eruptions) or emerging within the global system (Section 3.1; nuclear weapons are one example), can interact with *vulnerabilities* (Section 3.3) to produce GCR. A key component of the interaction between hazards and vulnerabilities is *amplification* (Section 3.2). Finally, *latent risk* (Section 3.4) is risk which may be generated by present-day phenomena but only becomes active in certain future system states: this may be particularly important in the aftermath of a global catastrophe. An important point is that each of these four phenomena (hazards, vulnerability, amplification, and latent risk) is in large part *emergent* from the global system.

We define vulnerability as the property of a system which determines the magnitude of the catastrophe resulting from a given hazard or combination of hazards.⁸ Thus, if a system is highly vulnerable to a certain hazard, exposure to that hazard will lead to a large catastrophe. Vulnerability is a key concept in the study of disaster risk (UNDRR, 2019), and its importance for understanding GCR has been highlighted previously (Baum, 2023; Liu et al., 2018; Mani et al., 2023). Different parts of the global system may be more or less vulnerable to different hazards. We use the plural “vulnerabilities” (e.g. as in Figure 2) to denote elements of a system which make the system as a whole particularly vulnerable with respect to certain hazards. Importantly, there are signs that our overall vulnerability in the context of GCR has been increasing, and this is the focus of Section 3.3.

Our framework also includes *amplification* (Figure 2 and Section 3.2). We use amplification to describe the process of how a realised hazard or set of hazards may cause a catastrophe much larger than the direct impact itself. The potential for such (often nonlinear) amplification is a key characteristic of CASs, and highlighting this concept allows for a clearer connection to the literature on emergent global risk. Amplification is deeply related to, but distinct from, vulnerability: vulnerability is a property of a system, while amplification is a process occurring in response to an instantiated hazard.

⁸ Additionally, the concept of *exposure* refers to the interface (or “reaction surface”) between hazard and vulnerability. Exposure is an important concept for natural disasters because those tend to be localised: for example, earthquakes have very different impacts depending on how close they occur to human settlements. However, in the case of global catastrophic risk, there is often a complicated interplay between vulnerability and exposure: for example, global air traffic networks, which could be interpreted as a vulnerability, can cause a localised epidemic (local exposure) to become a global pandemic (global exposure). For the purposes of this article, we take a broad view of vulnerability in which it includes those properties of systems which can transform exposure from local to global.

Finally, the fourth component of our framework is *latent risk*. Essentially, latent risk is risk which may be generated by present-day phenomena but only becomes active in certain future system states. One particularly severe instance of latent risk concerns the aftermath of global catastrophes, and this is what is focused on in Figure 2. Latent risk is discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.

We note that our framework (Figure 2) is not a complete causal model of global catastrophic risk. Specifically, the statement that any of the above phenomena “emerges within” the global system hides a more complex truth: they often emerge from specific parts of the global system (not all parts of the global system contribute equally to risk) as well as the actions of specific actors. While we do not shy away from these issues, there is a limit to what can be achieved within one article. Here, we view our focus on the global system (rather than its subsystems) as a necessary simplification: future work can and should elaborate much more on the details (see also Section 5.3).

3.1 Hazards

Following the above, we define hazards as the events and processes which can serve as the proximal causes of undesirable outcomes. While early discussion of GCR often focused on exogenous hazards like asteroid impacts, many of the most concerning hazards facing humanity emerge from within the global system. For instance, anthropogenic climate change occurs due to humanity’s consumption of fossil fuels (IPCC, 2021). Technological as well as geopolitical developments led to the creation of nuclear weapons, the maintenance of nuclear arsenals, and thus the risk of global nuclear war (e.g. Jacobsen, 2024; Waltz & Sagan, 1995). Environmental encroachment promotes the emergence of new pandemic hazards (Jones et al., 2013; Singh, 2021), and advances in biotechnology may do the same in the future (Millett & Snyder-Beattie, 2017; Musunuri et al., 2021). Despite many concerns about the societal impacts of artificial intelligence (AI), development of more and more powerful AI models is essentially racing full steam ahead, in large part due to economic and geopolitical dynamics (Brandt et al., 2022; Lee, 2018).

Why are these hazards being created? One possible answer focuses on the actions of agents. For example, Kemp (2021) has argued that a small number of “agents of doom” pursue power and profit at the expense of creating these hazards for the rest of humanity. 78 corporate and state fossil fuel producing entities are responsible for more than 70% of total cumulative carbon dioxide emissions (Carbon Majors, 2024), only nine states possess nuclear weapons (Herre et al., 2024), and only a handful of companies are currently leading the “AI arms race”.⁹ Understanding how responsibility for hazard creation may be concentrated among a small number of actors is important not only for its own sake, but also for its instrumental value: it can provide important insights about ways to lower GCR (Jones, 2023).

Nevertheless, part of the problem is more pernicious: these actors exist within systems in which it makes sense — or appears to make sense — for them to create risk. Governments justify their maintenance of nuclear arsenals based on principles of strategic rationality (Amadae, 2015). Companies extract and sell fossil fuels because they can make a large profit doing so, and individuals are constrained and incentivised to

⁹ By “AI arms race” we mean the real or perceived race for technological superiority with respect to AI (Baum, 2020; Cave & ÓhÉigeartaigh, 2018; de Neufville & Baum, 2021); this does not necessarily imply military usage.

consume them. One approach for describing this behaviour is using game theory: in particular, the “tragedy of the commons” highlights that it can seem individually rational to help deplete certain resources, including our collective security from global risk (Barrett, 2016; Posner, 2004). However, such rational-actor narratives have key limitations (Dietz et al., 2003; Ostrom, 1990), and can also serve as part of the problem, by themselves encouraging the hazard-creating actions (Amadae, 2015).

Going a step further, the incentives for actors to create global hazards exist in part because national and international institutions have not taken effective regulatory action to prevent them from existing. While this is in part because these institutions themselves have little incentive to understand and prepare for large-scale unprecedented events (Posner, 2004; Wiener, 2016), it is also due to a number of other issues: some are discussed below, and others in Section 4. In any case, while actors remain free to create global hazards for power and profit, some will choose to do so.

Hazard-creating systems can also entrench themselves in ways that make change difficult. For example, in the case of climate change, fossil fuel companies sowed a sophisticated decades-long disinformation campaign to mislead the public (Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Supran et al., 2023). They are also supported by a range of governmental subsidies and tax incentives which actively make decarbonisation less economically feasible (Seto et al., 2016). At a systems level there are effectively stabilising feedbacks in play: the fossil-fuel-industrial complex is deeply resistant to change. Understanding these kinds of mechanisms is vital for hazard reduction.

Ultimately, these patterns of hazard creation reflect a fundamental fact about complex adaptive systems. Because selection (e.g. biological, cultural, or economic) occurs at lower levels (Levin 1998; Levin et al. 2013), the behaviours which are selected for are not necessarily beneficial for the system as a whole. This has also been described using the concept of “evolutionary traps” (Søgaard Jørgensen et al., 2024). In this case, some of the selected behaviours create global hazards.

3.2 Amplification

The global system can also amplify hazards. Due to the process of amplification, a realised hazard or set of hazards may cause a catastrophe much larger than the direct impact itself. The March 2021 blocking of the Suez Canal by the container ship *Ever Given*, with consequences of billions of US dollars in lost trade income (Russon, 2021), was a clear demonstration of how small hazards can be amplified within the global system. More generally, the possibility of nonlinear (i.e. disproportionate) amplification of risk by the global system or its many subsystems has been the focus of much of the work reviewed in Section 2.3 (Centeno et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2014; Helbing, 2013; Homer-Dixon et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2024; Renn et al., 2017, 2022; Sillmann et al., 2022; Spaiser et al., 2024).

For a simple conceptual understanding of amplification in the context of GCR, we again consider the simple metaphor of a ball in a stability landscape (Figure 3). We conceive of the global system as existing in a state of dynamic quasi-equilibrium: it is constantly evolving, yet its basic function and structure persists, and minor shocks can be recovered from. Yet other possible system states exist, some of which would constitute global

catastrophic outcomes. Hazards (Section 3.1) can push the system out of its current basin of attraction towards one of these (normatively) worse states, whereupon the effect of the hazard is amplified by feedbacks internal to the system. Vulnerability enters this picture in multiple ways: how shallow is the original basin of attraction (how weak are the initial stabilising feedbacks), how strong are the feedbacks driving the system to the new outcome, and how severe (i.e. normatively bad) is the new outcome? The concept of resilience also relates to the depth of the original basin of attraction, but in the opposite direction: here, a decrease in resilience is an increase in vulnerability.

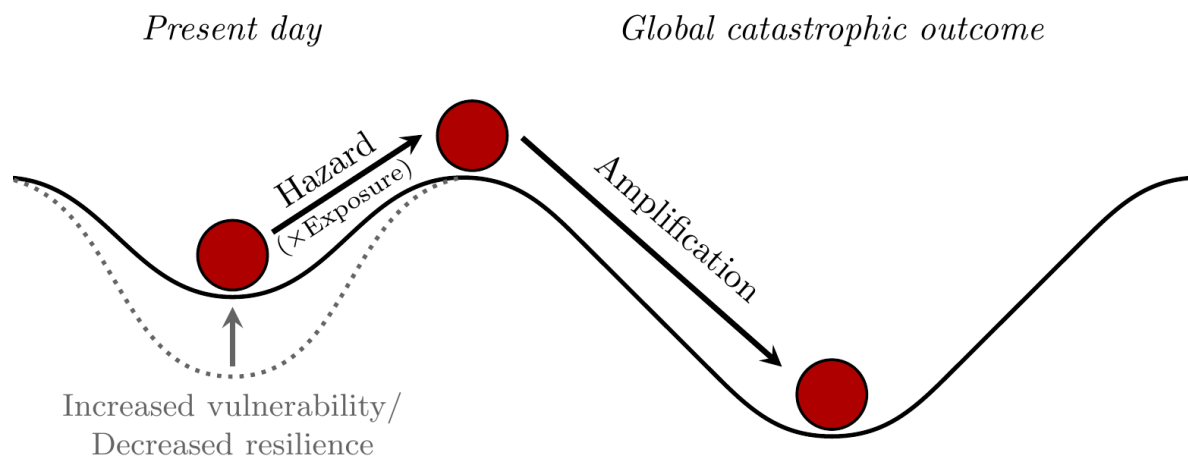


Figure 3. Amplification in the context of global catastrophic risk. Hazards (modulated by exposure) threaten the system’s persistence in its current basin of attraction, and can set in motion runaway evolution towards global catastrophic outcomes (amplification). The broad notion of vulnerability relates to multiple things here: how deep are the two basins of attraction, and how bad is the global catastrophic outcome? We emphasise that this picture is vastly oversimplified (see text), but it captures important elements of the problem.

This picture is of course an oversimplification. There are many possible kinds of global catastrophic outcomes, many possible pathways to them, and the degree of amplification will vary based on the specific case. Figure 3 depicts amplification as occurring via a tipping point,¹⁰ but this does not need to be the case: amplification can also occur without tipping points. Amplification can also occur when multiple co-occurring hazards cause more damage together than they would have separately, or when one hazard triggers another hazard. The key point is that emergent behaviour in complex adaptive systems can lead to an amplification of hazards. Figure 3 highlights this and also allows us to make important conceptual connections.

Amplification would play an important role in a wide range of global catastrophe scenarios. The impacts of natural hazards like asteroid impacts and volcanic eruptions would be amplified through their effects on global critical infrastructure (Baum, 2023; Mani et al., 2023; Moersdorf et al., 2023); indeed, the clustering of such infrastructure near centres of volcanic activity vastly amplifies the risk even from lower-magnitude

¹⁰ Specifically, it depicts amplification as occurring once the system passes across the top of the hill, which represents an unstable equilibrium state. This is technically an instance of “noise-induced” (Ashwin et al., 2012) or “shock-induced” (Feudel, 2023) tipping. For an accessible explanation of different kinds of tipping in terms of stability landscapes, see Lenton (2023).

volcanic eruptions (Mani et al., 2021). As the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated, the impact of novel infectious diseases can be vastly amplified by global transit networks (Baker et al., 2022) as well as by follow-on economic and social disruption. The worst outcomes from climate change will likely not arise directly due to increased temperatures, but rather indirectly through phenomena like conflict, famine, and mass displacement (Beard et al., 2021; Kemp et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2021). The effects of nuclear war could be amplified by subsequent global cooling, leading to large-scale global starvation (Xia et al., 2022). Developments in AI capabilities could be amplified towards catastrophic outcomes well before the emergence of artificial general intelligence, for example via societal and economic destabilisation (Kasirzadeh, 2024; Kulveit et al., 2025) and interactions with biological and nuclear risk (Bengio et al., 2025; EBRC, 2023; Hendrycks et al., 2023; Maas et al., 2023)

The work on emergent global risk (Section 2.3) helps us understand further details of how the global system can amplify hazards. Amplification on networks can be understood in terms of contagion and cascading failure (Helbing, 2013; Krönke et al., 2020; Newman, 2018), and has played a key role in conceptualisations of global systemic risk (Centeno et al., 2015). Many of the amplifying effects alluded to in the above paragraph result from nonlinear social dynamics (Miller & Page, 2009; Schelling, 1978), and could be understood in terms of social tipping points with negative outcomes (Juhola et al., 2022; Spaiser et al., 2024). We briefly note that such amplifying social dynamics can include human responses to hazards: as one example, trade restrictions in response to global food price shocks usually increase prices further (Alexander et al., 2023; Clapp & Moseley, 2020). In practice, amplification would involve a complicated web of nonlinear change within systems as well as interactions between systems. Approaches such as the stress-trigger-crisis model of Lawrence et al. (2024) or the earlier causal archetypes of the “synchronous failure” model (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015) could prove very helpful in understanding this (Section 5.2).

One particularly severe outcome of amplification in the context of GCR could be global societal collapse. While there are many ways to define the latter, one simple, forward-looking option in our case is a rapid development of the global system towards a state where it is no longer able to provide (as it currently does) for the material subsistence of most humans.¹¹ It is unclear whether such a collapse could be recovered from (Baum et al., 2019; Belfield, 2023). There has been much work on the subject of collapse, most notably in the case of past societies (Brozović, 2023; Centeno et al., 2023; Tainter, 1988) but also in ecology (Cumming & Peterson, 2017) and in complex evolutionary systems more generally (Arnscheidt & Rothman, 2022). While a wide range of possible mechanisms has been identified, one key consensus matters for our purposes: collapse may be set in motion by a particular hazard, but ultimately plays out due to feedbacks and mechanisms internal to the system (i.e. vulnerability and amplification).

3.3 Vulnerability

In the context of GCR, vulnerability is also emergent from within the global system. For instance, a key point of the literature on emergent global risk is that there is greater potential for amplification in the global

¹¹ This is not to suggest that the maintenance of the global system in its current state is normatively desirable. However, a failure of this system to provide for large-scale human subsistence, with no immediate alternatives available, would result in death and suffering on a vast scale.

system than there used to be (Centeno et al., 2015; Goldin & Mariathan, 2014; Helbing, 2013; Homer-Dixon et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2024). This increased *potential* for amplification is one form of increased vulnerability. The severity of possible outcomes may also be worse now than in the past; while the emergence of new and dangerous technologies (i.e. hazards) has played a role in this (Ord, 2020; Rees, 2004), so too has the fragility and potential irreplaceability of global critical infrastructure (Manheim, 2020). Here, we frame our analysis around three key sources of emerging vulnerability: increased global interconnectedness, decreased global diversity (in a variety of domains, and particularly in terms of possible responses to disruptions), and humanity's reliance on advanced technology as well as complex sociotechnical systems.

The trend of increasing global interconnectedness is readily apparent. For example, global food trade flows have increased substantially in the last few decades (D'Odorico et al., 2018; Puma et al., 2015), and the yearly number of air traffic passengers doubled from 2 to 4 billion between 2000 and 2019 (facilitating the potential spread of pandemics; see e.g. Baker et al. 2022). Increased interconnectedness in the modern global system is typically identified as a major driver of amplification and global systemic risk (Centeno et al., 2015; Goldin & Mariathan, 2014; Helbing, 2013; Homer-Dixon et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2024; Sillmann et al., 2022). Interconnectedness decreases a system's susceptibility to smaller shocks, by allowing the flow of resources to make up for localised shortfalls, but increases its susceptibility to larger disruptions, by allowing failures to cascade (Foti et al., 2013; Helbing, 2013; Scheffer et al., 2012; Young et al., 2006). An illustrative thought experiment is the following (Siegenfeld & Bar-Yam, 2020): imagine you have 100 ladders leaning up against a wall, and then you tie them all together. Each individual ladder is much less likely to fall, but if they do fall they will all fall at once.

A second important trend affecting vulnerability is a loss of global diversity. This has been occurring in a wide range of contexts, from language to institutions to biology (Williams et al., 2015; Young et al., 2006). One specific instructive example is in the global food system: food production is increasingly reliant on a small number of staple grain species, dominated by a small number of companies, and dominated by a small number of countries (Clapp, 2023; Nyström et al., 2019). This allows for greatly increased short-term productivity, but makes us more vulnerable should conditions suddenly change: for example, what happens if one of these staple grain species or key global suppliers fails for some reason? More generally, the loss of diversity is an issue because diversity is part of how complex adaptive systems retain resilience (Levin 1998; Folke et al. 2004; Levin et al. 2013). A particularly useful framing is that of response diversity: maintaining a variety of potential response behaviours provides complex systems — including the global system — with the “raw material” for adaptive capacity after disruptions (Walker et al., 2023).

A third key trend is humanity's increasing reliance on advanced technology — and indeed, on complex sociotechnical systems (composed of humans and their interactions with technology) which no individual human fully understands. Returning to the food system example, developments in industrial agriculture (breeding new high-yield crop strains, large-scale fertiliser production, machinery) vastly increased global yields throughout the 20th century (Evenson & Gollin, 2003; Smil, 2004); yet, most humans now depend on these technologies for their survival (Moersdorf et al., 2023; Smil, 2022). Greater integration of AI into agricultural systems (Galaz et al., 2021; Tzachor et al., 2022) will amplify this dependence. Technological

dependence can interplay with global interconnectedness: as a smaller-scale case study, we can consider the recent shortage of new cars in the United States due to semiconductor shortages on the other side of the globe (Dziczek, 2022).

In practice, we depend not just on the advanced technologies themselves but also on the increasingly complex sociotechnical systems within which the technologies are manufactured, distributed, and used. Sociotechnical complexity, despite its other benefits, sets us up for hard-to-prevent cascading failures (Perrow, 1999). More critically, increases in complexity are often irreversible, as important infrastructure and knowledge pertaining to older approaches is lost (Manheim, 2020) — increasing the severity of the worst-case outcomes.

Of course these three trends have brought substantial benefits. Beyond the other benefits of globalisation, increased interconnectedness reduces the risk of smaller disruptions. Reduced diversity and advanced technology both allow for increased productivity and efficiency under a specific set of circumstances, and thus plausibly also help the global system buffer against certain smaller shocks. Yet, despite these benefits, we suggest that each of these three trends increase the likelihood and potential severity of global catastrophic outcomes. Interconnectedness allows failure to spread much more quickly to larger scales, and a lack of diversity means the global system will struggle to adapt to certain unexpected disruptions. The dependence on technology means that scenarios involving some loss or failure of this technology lead to much more catastrophic outcomes than they otherwise would.

If our vulnerability in the context of GCR has indeed been increasing, why is this? At one level of explanation, we can highlight economic incentives to prioritise efficiency (short-term reliable productivity) over resilience. This is particularly apparent in ecosystem management, where there is a long history of humans attempting to “optimise” an ecosystem (e.g. for productivity) and later finding, often at great cost, that key elements of resilience were lost in the process (Holling & Meffe, 1996; Scott, 1998). For much the same reasons which lead to insufficient governance of hazard-creating actors (see Section 3.1), there is insufficient governance of vulnerability-creating actors. As long as these actors (individuals, companies, or states) can obtain a short-term gain from actions that increase global vulnerability (prioritising efficiency over resilience), they will do so.

Yet, things are also more complicated. Many of the key factors driving global vulnerability — including the three trends outlined above, are ultimately emerging in a complex decentralised manner. As one additional example, the fact that our complex global infrastructure can develop highly connected hubs which propagate disruptions (e.g. Mani et al., 2021) is due to fundamental aspects of bottom-up network development, such as preferential attachment (Newman, 2018), which are very difficult to avoid. Nevertheless, governments and global institutions can proactively invest in resilience, for example by investing in and promoting response diversity (Walker et al., 2023), actively maintaining backups for key critical infrastructure systems, carefully modularising those systems (see Tzachor et al., 2021 as one example), and so on.

Ultimately, much like the emergent generation of hazards, the generation of vulnerability is a deep consequence of the fact that selection in complex adaptive systems occurs at lower levels (Levin 1998; Levin et al. 2013) and is thus not necessarily to the benefit of the system as a whole. The generation of vulnerability in the global system can also be related to the growth phase of the adaptive cycle (Homer-Dixon, 2006): this involves precisely increasing connectivity and decreasing diversity.

3.4 Latent risk

Another, perhaps more easily overlooked, systemic contribution to GCR involves latent risk. Latent risk refers to risk that is dormant under one set of conditions but becomes active under another (Kemp et al., 2022; Tang & Kemp, 2021). One illustrative example of latent risk on a global scale is the following (Tang & Kemp, 2021): while stratospheric aerosol injection (SAI) could cool the planet and potentially reduce global warming, it also introduces the risk of “termination shock”, in which the planet warms very quickly if aerosol injection were to suddenly stop (Parker & Irvine, 2018). Here, the risk is created by the introduction of SAI, but remains latent at first — it is only activated if SAI suddenly stops.

Latent risk can also be thought of as reflecting *path dependence* within the global system. Path dependence means that the evolution of the system depends not just on its present state but also on its history — in other words, the path taken to get there — and is a fundamental property of complex adaptive systems (Levin, 1998). The idea of latent risk highlights that the global system may evolve along different “paths” in the future, that on some of these paths humanity is exposed to a much greater risk of catastrophic outcomes than on others, and, critically, that events and processes taking place in the present can affect the magnitude of the risk faced in these future system states. While one could try to conceptualise this behaviour purely in terms of the interaction of hazards and vulnerabilities over time, we find the concept of latent risk a particularly powerful one, and thus include it as the fourth component of our conceptual framework.

The global system is actively generating latent risk. For example, beyond its immediate impacts, climate change could hamper humanity’s ability to recover from other catastrophes (Kemp et al., 2022). More generally, if any of the global critical systems which humanity depends on were to fail (Avin et al., 2018), this might trap us in a state where that system could not be regenerated, and would also decrease our species’ resilience to further catastrophes, such as human extinction. If increasing sociotechnical complexity leads to the loss of simpler alternatives (Manheim, 2020; see also Section 3.3), this present-day trend increases the latent risk in such scenarios. To illustrate these issues while maintaining a focus on the worst-case outcomes, we now consider how systemic risk would manifest after global societal collapse (noting that any reasoning about post-collapse worlds is necessarily speculative).

After a collapse, emergent phenomena might trap the system in the collapsed state. Various theories of human civilisational development — i.e., the development of the global system — emphasise the role of amplifying feedbacks. For example, the industrial revolution may have been substantially driven by feedback cycles that rapidly increased human access to energy (Lenton & Scheffer, 2024). However, if the global system were to collapse and advanced technology were to be lost, it is not clear that this pattern could be repeated, because most easily accessible fossil fuel will have been used up (Baum et al., 2019; Belfield,

2023).¹² If amplifying feedbacks initially propelled the global system to its present state, the lack of such feedbacks — and thus, a dominance of stabilising feedbacks — could prevent re-industrialisation after a collapse.

After a collapse, emergent phenomena could also substantially increase the risk of human extinction. Without industrial methods of food production, global population would fall to a substantially lower level and may also become geographically disconnected. Surviving human populations could then face nonlinear ecological dynamics akin to those faced by non-human species (e.g. May, 1977; Scheffer et al., 2001), including runaway extinction if population numbers fall below a minimum size.¹³ Crucially, minimum viable population sizes are often set by the influence of population size on the ability to effectively cooperate (Stephens & Sutherland, 1999), and may thus be much higher than those predicted purely on the basis of genetics (e.g. Baum et al., 2019). While complete human extinction remains a high bar, one key point is worth emphasising: because of latent risk and emergent phenomena, a given catastrophe does not need to make Earth completely uninhabitable to ultimately lead to human extinction.

4. Challenges for assessing and mitigating systemic contributions to GCR

Assessing and mitigating GCR is challenging for a number of reasons. Some issues are endemic to risk analysis as a whole: for example, there is a large literature on individual human perceptions of risk, and their socially mediated amplification and/or attenuation (Kasperson et al., 1988, 2022; Slovic, 1987). Others are more specific to GCR: for example, future unprecedented high-impact scenarios are fundamentally difficult to study (e.g. Beard et al., 2020; Currie, 2019; Yudkowsky, 2008) and to institutionally prepare for (e.g. Posner, 2004; Wiener, 2016). Reviewing all of these issues is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, in this section, we briefly highlight some issues specifically related to systemic sources of GCR.

First, emergent complexity makes it impossible to understand the full state of the global system (i.e. its interconnections, structures, dependencies); to the extent to which GCR emerges from this complexity, this makes it more difficult to understand GCR. Again, “complex” should be distinguished from “complicated”: systems with only the latter property are ultimately fully knowable and manageable in a top-down manner, while those with the former are not (Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020). When the impossibility of knowing the full system state is combined with the possibility for sudden nonlinear disruption, we further find that abrupt surprises are to be expected (Duit & Galaz, 2008; Siegenfeld & Bar-Yam, 2020; see also Taleb, 2007). With respect to GCR, this puts us fundamentally into the realm of “deep uncertainty” (Walker et al., 2013), where we know (or can agree on) neither the full set of possible outcomes nor their likelihoods. Complexity and deep uncertainty fundamentally challenge existing risk assessment and governance paradigms (Currie, 2019; Duit & Galaz, 2008; Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020; Schweizer, 2021; Schweizer & Juhola, 2024).

¹² We note that there are other factors which point in the opposite direction: for example, metals would be much more easily accessible in a post-collapse world than earlier in Earth history, because they could be scavenged from the ruins of cities (Baum et al., 2019; Belfield, 2023).

¹³ For a brief discussion of minimum viable human population sizes in the context of a post-collapse world, see Baum et al. (2019)

The complex structure of the global system also makes it difficult to mitigate against GCR. For example, the relatively decentralised nature of the international system leaves us with profound governance gaps regarding both GCR and global systemic risk (Blake & Gilman, 2024; Goldin & Vogel, 2010; Rhodes & Kemp, 2024), coordination problems, and a lack of identifiable risk owners. Top-down control is not necessarily better: existing top-down paradigms and institutions also struggle to govern systemic contributions to GCR (Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020; Sundaram, 2023). Any system created to help govern the complexity becomes a part of the complexity (Fisher & Sandberg, 2022), with a non-zero chance of making things worse. As noted previously, beyond our own individual biases, our governing institutions are structured such that there are strong incentives to undervalue GCR mitigation, for example due to short political time horizons (Posner, 2004; Wiener, 2016).

Developing comprehensive solutions to the above issues is a huge challenge; nevertheless, there are some brief points we can make. First, we need better methods for assessing and forecasting under deep uncertainty: structured (expert) elicitation methods and collective intelligence may be useful here (Cremer & Whittlestone, 2021; Marcoci et al., 2023; Yang & Sandberg, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, we need to recognise the weaknesses of the “legacy toolkit” of top-down planned management for governing complexity, and that the traditional goals of certainty and control are not attainable. Instead, governance should be more dynamic, flexible, and adaptive: others have provided a number of recommendations for achieving this (Duit & Galaz, 2008; Fisher & Sandberg, 2022; Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020). Filling the governance gaps (Blake & Gilman, 2024; Goldin & Vogel, 2010; Rhodes & Kemp, 2024) is another clear priority.

5. Discussion

5.1 Beyond hazard-focused frameworks for understanding GCR

The ideas presented in this article can help us better understand GCR, in a number of ways. Perhaps most fundamentally, building on earlier work (Liu et al., 2018), we have made clear that GCR is composed of much more than hazards. Much GCR literature has tended to implicitly conflate hazard and risk: this is typically apparent in any list of “global catastrophic risks” or “existential risks” (e.g. Bostrom & Cirkovic, 2008; Cotton-Barratt et al., 2016; Ord, 2020). While focusing on hazards was useful in early GCR work, this critically neglects amplification, vulnerability, and so on. A useful (though non-absolute) heuristic may be to say that we face global catastrophic risk — not risks — and that the various things we are concerned about are those which contribute to this overall risk.

Building on these ideas, our framework (Figure 2) provides one way to think about systemic contributors to risk beyond hazards. There are other ways to do so, for example in terms of hazard, vulnerability and exposure (Liu et al., 2018); in terms of the critical systems affected, spread mechanisms, and prevention and mitigation failures (Avin et al., 2018); and in terms of prevention, response, and resilience opportunities (Cotton-Barratt et al., 2020). All of these frameworks complement each other. Advantages of our

framework include: the focus on amplification, which allows for a clearer connection to the literature on emergent global risk (Section 2.3; see also Section 5.2), the focus on the origins of global vulnerability, the fundamental grounding in CAS theory, and the inclusion of latent risk.

Our framework can be used to structure thinking about the sources of GCR, and potentially to categorise and generate specific interventions for GCR mitigation. GCR can be reduced by reducing the probability or magnitude of hazards (as noted by much other work), reducing the potential for amplification, avoiding the emergence of vulnerability in the first place, and reducing latent risk. More indirectly (Section 4), GCR can also be reduced by developing better methods and institutions for GCR assessment and governance under complexity.

5.2 The emergence of GCR from the global system

A second contribution of this article is in thoroughly connecting the literature on GCR with the literature on emergent global risk (e.g. Section 2.3). Our conceptual framework highlights the synergies between these two fields, as well as what they can learn from each other.

GCR research can learn from research on emergent global risk that GCR is much more endogenous to the global system than is often assumed, and can acquire useful insights about how this works. Specifically, it can draw on the large volume of work on the amplification of hazards, via concepts like systemic risk (Centeno et al., 2015; Renn et al., 2017, 2022; Sillmann et al., 2022), hyper-risk (Helbing, 2013), femtorisk (Frank et al., 2014), synchronous failure (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015), polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024) and negative social tipping points (Juhola et al., 2022; Spaiser et al., 2024). GCR research can also learn from research on the deep trends in global vulnerability (see e.g. Homer-Dixon et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2024; Nyström et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2023).

Going the other direction, scholars of emergent global risk could take inspiration from GCR to engage more deeply with worst-case outcomes. The study of the amplification of hazards, as well as of deep trends in global vulnerability, could be straightforwardly extended to a greater scale: what about scenarios such as global collapse? Furthermore, while research on emergent global risk has had much to say about amplification and vulnerability, it has had little to say about hazards that are not climate change (e.g. nuclear weapons, pandemics, advanced AI): one notable recent exception is the work by Søgaard Jørgensen et al., (2024). There is much unexplored territory here, and our analysis helps point at some promising initial directions.

5.3 Limitations and future directions

We acknowledge that our conceptual framework has some major limitations. A first limitation stems from our focus on the global system. This was a necessary simplification for the purposes of this paper; however, it potentially obscures the fact that not all parts of the global system contribute equally to the creation of GCR. Indeed, the very focus on “systems” can also obscure the important role played by human agency.

Much more work could be done on understanding both of these issues, and on integrating them within the broader perspective laid out in this article.

A second and more subtle limitation lies in the very framing of risk as instantiated by some hazard or set of hazards which occurs with some probability. Even with amplification, vulnerability, and more emergent phenomena included, this framing can still struggle to capture some of the complex causal webs that may be responsible for GCR. This is the case, for example, if hazards interact, trigger each other, and/or are slow-moving (e.g. Kuhlemann, 2018; Liu et al., 2018). We need better tools for capturing and understanding complex pathways to global catastrophic outcomes.

Recent work on polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024) provides an ambitious conceptual framework that could help with some of these issues. In particular, Lawrence et al. introduce their stress-trigger-crisis model (conceptualised similarly to Figure 3) in which slow stresses destabilise a system, triggers push it out of its basin of attraction, and crises occur when the system is on the cusp of exiting the basin. Each of these factors can interact within and across different systems — providing a conceptual means to understand how various subsystems of the global system interact to generate GCR. Their focus on “the realization of chains of cause and effect that cause harms”, rather than on risk, may further help to overcome the second limitation described above. However, we note that in the case of GCR, it is in part the focus on risk which allows us to speak with clarity about possible worst-case outcomes — and, if preventing such outcomes is a priority, it is critical that we are able to do so.

5.4 Systems-informed mitigation: leverage points for reducing GCR

With all this knowledge in hand, how best to reduce GCR? Beyond what we have already discussed (e.g. in Section 5.1), systems thinking has another critical insight to offer us: leverage points (Holland, 1995; Meadows, 2008). Essentially, the possibility of nonlinear change in the complex global system also cuts in a positive direction: the right intervention, in the right place, could plausibly have an outsized impact in terms of reducing GCR.

This idea has been increasingly applied in the context of climate change and the transition to a zero-carbon economy. Two framings are those of “sensitive intervention points” (Farmer et al., 2019) and “positive tipping points” (Geels & Ayoub, 2023; Lenton et al., 2022; Otto et al., 2020; Winkelmann et al., 2022). While the latter concept is potentially more restrictive (not all instances of nonlinear change are appropriately categorised as “tipping”), it has the advantage that there could be “early opportunity signals”¹⁴ that such a transition is possible (Lenton et al., 2022). Critically, tipping points (and leverage points more broadly) could be upward-scaling (Sharpe & Lenton, 2021), allowing for substantial change even in highly decentralised situations or to be driven by actors conventionally deemed as less powerful.

We suggest that applying these concepts to GCR reduction — identifying, categorising, and activating potential leverage points for the reduction of GCR — should be a major priority for future research.

¹⁴ We note that early warning signals for tipping points have thus far often been better at retrodiction than prediction; see e.g. Boettiger & Hastings (2012).

Although a synthesis across the different key risk drivers is currently lacking, the framing of identifying particularly effective intervention points has already been used in the context of GCR: one recent example highlights access to computational power (“compute”) as a key point of leverage in AI governance (Sastri et al., 2024)

5.5 Policymaking for systemic GCR reduction

A systemic understanding of GCR provides some important insights for policymaking; here, we briefly summarise a few key points. As discussed in Section 5.1, it is essential to broaden the assessment of risk beyond hazards, and not to conflate the two. Next, attempts to govern GCR must take into account the global system’s nature as a CAS (Section 4). This includes recognising deep uncertainty and employing better methods for understanding and anticipating GCR, as well as developing governance institutions which are more dynamic, flexible, and adaptive. A focus on resilience — specifically, resilience to global catastrophic hazards and/or outcomes — will be key. Identifying and activating leverage points (Section 5.4) could be helpful in implementing the required changes. Governments and intergovernmental institutions could set up central risk offices to act as risk owners, monitor contributors to GCR, conduct comprehensive risk assessments, and (democratically) plan responses. Importantly, GCR cannot be left ungoverned (as it currently largely is, see e.g. Rhodes & Kemp, 2024), and hazard-creating actors (Section 3.1) should be democratically reined in.

6. Conclusion

We face a complicated, complex, and dangerous global risk landscape. Some contributors to GCR are genuinely exogenous to the global system. However, many others are not: this includes some of the most salient hazards, like climate change, nuclear weapons, certain biological threats, and advanced artificial intelligence. It also includes amplification, vulnerability, and latent risk. Our conceptual framework helps understand such systemic contributions to GCR, and synthesises existing research on GCR with research on emergent global risk. More broadly, we have highlighted some unique challenges which systemic contributions to GCR pose for assessment and mitigation, highlighted important future research directions, and (briefly) discussed some implications for policy. While much remains to be done to assess and reduce GCR, we hope that this article will serve as a useful guidepost in such efforts.

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C.W.A. conceptualised and wrote the paper with input from all authors. All authors contributed to the text of the final article.

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Conflicts of interest

A.M. is a UKRI Policy Fellow seconded to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. The views and conclusions contained herein are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology or the UK Government.

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