

SUMMARY NOTES:

FT EXECUTIVE BRIEFING: MAKING SENSE OF MARKET COMPLEXITY:

VOLATILITY, SIGNALS AND STRATEGIC DECISIONS GEOPOLITICS, TALENT AND ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE



CRF and Headspring hosted an in-person event for senior HR leaders, Making Sense of Market Complexity: Volatility, Signals and Strategic Decisions. Featuring expert insights from Katie Martin, Market Columnist at the Financial Times, and Björn Beam, former CIA officer and Head of Geopolitical and Technology Research, Headspring Faculty, the session explored how financial markets, geopolitics, technology and organisational life are becoming increasingly interconnected, and what this means for leaders responsible for building resilient organisations in an environment characterised by uncertainty, disruption and rapid change.



ABOUT CRF

Corporate Research Forum (CRF) is a research-led learning network dedicated to building the capability of HR leaders and their teams to drive organisational performance. Through more than 30 years of research and practical expertise, we have developed a deep understanding of the ways HR can contribute to business outcomes – what works, what doesn't and in what circumstances. We support our network of over 250 organisations through an evolving programme of evidence-based insights: delivering expert led events, facilitated peer exchange, personalised and timely answers through our AI research tool and impactful technology-enabled learning – all informed by research and shaped by practice. Our focus enables HR to become a more strategic, future-ready function delivering consistent and measurable value tailored to the needs of your organisation.

For more details on how your organisation can benefit from being part of the CRF network, please contact:

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ABOUT HEADSPRING

Geopolitics literacy is a leadership competency

In today's environment, geopolitical volatility is no longer background noise, it is part of the context leaders must navigate every day. The ability to read external shifts, interpret their implications, and respond with judgement is a critical source of organisational advantage. For organisations, this means helping leaders move beyond awareness and build the confidence to connect global events to business decisions, risk and opportunity. Developing this fluency is increasingly part of preparing leadership teams for the realities they are already facing.

If this is a capability your leaders need to build, speak to Headspring.
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OFFER

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MARKETS AS SIGNALS, CONSTRAINTS AND PERSONAL REALITIES.

Katie Martin, Markets Columnist at the Financial Times, explained that markets do not live in a vacuum and increasingly shape geopolitics, politics and everyday life.

WHAT ARE MARKETS TELLING US?

The conflict between Israel and Iran provided a real-world test of market sentiment, with the most revealing signals coming not from what happened, but from what failed to happen as different markets responded in markedly different ways:

- **Energy markets remain concerned.** Although prices fell back after their initial spike, energy specialists continue to warn about disruption through the Strait of Hormuz, low global reserves and the possibility of substantially higher oil prices.
- **The US dollar is no longer behaving as expected.** Traditionally, investors move into dollars during periods of crisis. The dollar's muted response suggests confidence in US financial credibility has weakened.
- **Bonds and equities are sending different messages.** Bond markets remained weak even as stocks recovered, reflecting concerns about inflation, government borrowing and future interest rates. Equities, by contrast, remain buoyant, fuelled by enthusiasm for AI and major technology listings.

The result is an unusual combination of radical uncertainty and continued appetite for risk.



Katie Martin

Markets Columnist,
Financial Times

in LINKEDIN

WHY DO MARKETS MATTER?

These market signals matter because they have consequences that extend far beyond financial markets themselves. Increasingly, they shape the economic and political choices available to governments:

- **Bond markets can constrain government policy.** In April 2025, investors' refusal to buy US government bonds threatened the financing of government spending, forcing Trump to retreat from his tariff plans. For countries reliant on investors to finance public spending, market confidence becomes a practical constraint on political ambitions.
- **Inflation shapes electoral outcomes.** Voters dislike inflation and tend to punish incumbent governments when it takes hold. Rising energy and food prices therefore create both economic and political pressure on governments.
- **Debt limits political flexibility.** The UK's high levels of public debt mean the country cannot easily absorb significantly higher borrowing costs. As debt servicing consumes a growing share of public finances, governments have less room to pursue ambitious spending plans.
- **Bond investors are often misunderstood.** Bond investors are not simply speculative traders. In reality, many are pension funds, insurers and long-term institutional investors managing the savings of ordinary people.

These dynamics illustrate how financial markets increasingly shape the environment in which political decisions are made, influencing everything from government spending to electoral outcomes.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Financial literacy matters because individuals are exposed to these forces whether they engage with them or not. Markets are often perceived as something separate from everyday life. In reality, they directly influence personal wealth, retirement outcomes and living standards. Individuals therefore cannot afford to ignore them.

- **The UK has low levels of participation in financial markets.** Unlike the US, where investing is a normal part of financial life, much household wealth across the UK and Europe remains held in low-interest bank deposits rather than invested in productive assets.
- **Weak pension saving creates long-term risks.** The Pensions Commission found that only 45% of working-age Britons are saving into a pension. Participation is particularly low among the self-employed. Given the relatively modest value of the state pension, many people risk inadequate retirement income if they fail to build private savings.

HR can play a practical role in strengthening employees' long-term financial resilience while supporting healthier UK capital markets by:

- Encouraging participation in workplace pension schemes.
- Helping employees understand the benefits of long-term saving and investment.

GEOPOLITICS, TECHNOLOGY AND ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

Björn Beam, Director of Technology Analysis & Geopolitical Intelligence Expert, explained how the boundaries between geopolitics, technology, security and organisational life have broken down, creating a world of hybrid threats in which organisations and employees are increasingly participants rather than bystanders.

HOW HAS THE NATURE OF CONFLICT CHANGED?

Conflict increasingly occurs through technology, information, infrastructure and economics rather than purely military force.

- **Technology is becoming a central component of geopolitical competition.** Advances in Ukraine have demonstrated the growing role of AI targeting systems, rapid weapons development cycles and counter-drone technologies. Competition is also extending into space, where the US and China are increasingly contesting the satellite infrastructure on which modern economies depend.
- **Information is becoming a weapon.** Disinformation campaigns, AI-generated content and social media amplification now shape conflict alongside physical military action, contributing to a growing “digital fog” in which truth, misinformation and propaganda become increasingly difficult to distinguish. Examples such as AI-generated surrender videos of Taiwanese soldiers illustrate how information can be manipulated at scale.
- **Critical infrastructure is becoming a battleground.** Modern economies depend on energy, communications and technology supply chains that are increasingly exposed to geopolitical risk. Around 20–30% of global maritime oil and gas flows pass through the Strait of Hormuz, while Qatar supplies a significant share of the world’s helium, an important input for semiconductor manufacturing and data centre operations.



Björn Beam

Director of Technology Analysis & Geopolitical Intelligence Expert

in LINKEDIN

- **Cheap technologies are disrupting traditional power structures.** A \$10,000 AI-enabled drone can perform tasks that previously required systems costing millions of dollars. At the same time, technologies such as AI have become dual-use, serving both civilian and military purposes. Small investments can therefore generate outsized strategic effects, challenging traditional assumptions about military and economic power.

WHY DOES THIS AFFECT ORGANISATIONS?

Organisations and employees are no longer observers of geopolitical events. They are increasingly participants in them.

- **Individuals are part of the information environment.** Employees become “unconscious combatants” when they share, repost or amplify information, regardless of whether it is true or false. Everyday digital behaviour can therefore become part of wider geopolitical and information campaigns.
- **Talent has become a geopolitical asset.** AI engineers, semiconductor specialists and cryptographers are increasingly being contested by both companies and states. Talent pipelines therefore sit within wider geopolitical competition rather than existing separately from it.
- **Business operations are exposed to geopolitical risk.** Recruitment, intellectual property, data, technology and supply chains are increasingly contested. Organisations therefore face risks that were once considered matters of national security.
- **Disruption has workforce consequences.** Geopolitical events such as conflict in the Gulf region or tensions around Taiwan can disrupt energy, logistics and technology supply chains. The resulting workforce impacts are often managed through HR, making organisational resilience a people issue as much as an operational one.

WHAT SHOULD ORGANISATIONS DO?

If geopolitical competition increasingly plays out through technology, talent and information, HR has an increasingly important role to play in building organisational resilience. Key priorities include:

- **Workforce security.** Organisations must become more vigilant about identity verification, insider threats and the protection of intellectual property, particularly in sectors dealing with sensitive information and technologies.
- **Cyber capability.** AI-enabled cyberattacks are becoming more sophisticated and autonomous. Workforce digital hygiene, particularly among senior leaders who are often primary targets, is therefore an increasingly important component of organisational security. Similarly, AI governance cannot be treated as an IT issue alone; it requires involvement from HR, Legal and senior leadership.
- **Preparedness.** Disruption planning, scenario planning and supply-chain contingency planning are becoming increasingly important organisational capabilities in a world of persistent geopolitical uncertainty.
- **Leadership.** Geopolitical literacy is becoming a leadership competency. If geopolitical risk is now a board-level concern, leadership development can no longer focus solely on business performance and people management.
- **Trust.** Psychological safety, trust and preparedness are no longer “soft” issues. They are strategic assets that help organisations operate effectively during periods of uncertainty and disruption.



Q: Have we already allowed disinformation and information warfare to become so embedded in society that it is too late to reverse, and if not, what can governments, organisations and individuals do about it?

It is not too late to respond, but doing so requires recognising disinformation as a genuine security challenge rather than simply a social media problem. Hybrid attacks increasingly combine online influence campaigns with physical disruption, and misinformation often spreads through a relatively small number of highly influential networks and voices. Addressing this requires greater coordination between governments, technology platforms and organisations, alongside investment in identifying and disrupting the channels through which harmful narratives spread.

Q: Are concerns about social media and misinformation overly focused on younger users when older generations may be equally or more susceptible to online manipulation?

The challenge extends far beyond younger generations. While younger users are often assumed to be most vulnerable, older generations may be equally susceptible to misinformation because they are less familiar with how AI-generated content, manipulated media and algorithm-driven platforms operate. As AI continues to improve, distinguishing genuine content from fabricated content will become increasingly difficult for everyone. Responding effectively will require a broader societal effort focused on digital literacy, critical thinking and greater accountability for the platforms whose business models often reward engagement with divisive or emotionally charged content.

Q: How real is the risk that the UK and other countries could lose access to critical US-owned digital infrastructure and technology platforms, and what should organisations do to prepare for that possibility?

The risk remains a low-probability scenario, but one that organisations can no longer dismiss entirely. Many businesses have become deeply dependent on US-owned technology infrastructure, cloud services, communications platforms and payment systems that were built during a period of relative geopolitical stability. Leaders should understand where critical systems and data are located, what dependencies exist and how the organisation would continue operating if access to key services became restricted. The purpose is not to predict a specific disruption, but to understand where vulnerabilities exist and to develop contingency plans before they are needed.

Q: What reasons are there for optimism in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical and economic environment?

Despite the risks discussed throughout the session, there are significant reasons for optimism. Advances in AI are already accelerating scientific discovery and healthcare innovation, from identifying new antibiotics to supporting breakthroughs in areas such as genomics and brain-computer interfaces. The same technologies that create new risks also have the potential to generate profound societal benefits. The challenge is not whether these technologies will transform society, but how organisations and governments manage the opportunities and risks that accompany them.

Q: What should HR leaders be doing to strengthen organisational resilience in the face of increasingly plausible geopolitical and systemic risks?

Rather than attempting to predict every possible disruption, organisations should focus on building adaptable and resilient workforces. This means developing people who are curious, comfortable with uncertainty and willing to continuously learn as circumstances change. It also requires organisations to think more deliberately about contingency planning, communication and preparedness. The objective is not to create perfect plans for every scenario, but to build the capability to respond effectively when unexpected events occur.

Q: How can organisations move beyond awareness of long-term risks and translate resilience planning into meaningful action?

Resilience becomes meaningful when it is translated into practical planning and relationships. Organisations should think through second- and third-order consequences of major disruptions, engage with insurers, risk specialists and peers, and build networks that can be drawn upon during a crisis. As one example, Frequentis was able to evacuate employees from the UAE within 24 hours of regional tensions escalating because contingency plans, local relationships and decision-making processes were already in place. Building resilience is therefore not solely about risk management; it is about creating the organisational capability to respond when disruption occurs.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Turning Uncertainty into Advantage

Monday 5: Wednesday 7
October 2026

Malta

FT Executive Briefing – Autumn Session

Thursday: 24 September
2026

London

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2026. [The HR Function and Risk Management: Navigating Complexity with Resilience](#)

CRF. 2025. [The Changing Role of the HR Leader](#)