

Global Challenges, Scattered Answers

1985-2005: Twenty years that changed the world

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I - Understanding the current state of the world. The old order has gone. The new one is yet to emerge

To understand the current state of international relations, it is necessary in my view to look first at how the old order, namely the Cold War, collapsed. The end of the Cold War was not the outcome of any real armed conflict. In traditional wars there is no doubt about who the winners are and about who the defeated are. Winners impose their will on the defeated when it comes to rebuild the new order. It was like this after the Napoleonic Wars, when the Vienna Congress restored the old system; it was like this after World War I, when the Treaty of Versailles was imposed on Germany and the US pushed efforts to create the first international organization; and, finally, it was like this once more after World War II, with the creation of the United Nations, Bretton Woods and the GATT.

No such thing has happened during the past twenty years. The end of the Cold War is in certain ways a melancholic event, unlikely to ever generate a good script for epic movies. It was a different kind of defeat. The communist block dissolved itself, in a kind of natural death by inanition unworthy of any honors in the battlefield. But it was also a different kind of victory. The Western democracies can justifiably claim to be the winners of the Cold War. But there was neither the time nor any justification for open celebration by the winners, who found themselves immediately busy preventing former communist countries in Eastern Europe from crumbling altogether as well as helping them repair the economic wreckage they had imposed themselves.

There was no need to dismantle the institutions in place. No big conference to reshape the global institutional framework, neither to re-define borders within much of the vast territory of what was once called the Iron Curtain. Quite the contrary. Without having its role formally changed or questioned, the United Nations was soon to be given a new lease of life and be used very effectively, both in conflicts such as the first Gulf War, in 1991, and in organizing global conferences on issues such as environment, human rights, population etc. The GATT, for its turn, was converted from a provisional agreement to open markets and to promote free trade into a permanent institution when the Uruguay Round was completed. The IMF and the World Bank continued their business as usual.

In other words, we still have to count on essentially the same institutional machinery built after World War II

to deal with far more complex issues in a deeply changed world. This is no easy task. Therein is one of the challenges of today's world. How to rebuild what has not been fully destroyed? How to deal with new issues and problems with institutions that are mirrored in old realities?

The old order of the Cold War is gone for good. But the new pattern of any kind of international relations model is yet to become evident. It is a bit like the novel by Lampedusa, "Il Gattopardo", which takes place at a certain point in mid-nineteenth century Italy when it was already clear that monarchy and aristocracy were condemned, but democracy and the bourgeoisie were still to triumph completely.

Those transitional moments in History generate uncertainty and anxiety. These are clearly signs of our times.

II - The changed world we live in

The world has changed so dramatically since the days of Perestroika that it is almost impossible for me to dwell on all aspects of those changes and their implications. I will be selective in my analysis and concentrate only on a few points:

An expanded number of States

Probably the most visible, the most touchable offspring of the disintegration of the former Soviet empire is dozens of new and independent States. Some of those States recovered their independence. Others were simply created in what was certainly a messy and largely uncontrolled process. The world has become more fragmented by the multiplication of Sovereign States.

Nation-building in those newly-created States is still under way, with all the difficulties it entails such as rampant nationalism, terrorism, border disputes, religious divisions, protection of minorities. The case of former Yugoslavia is only one example, if a dramatic one.

Maybe more relevant to our debate this morning is the enormous challenges posed by the impact of the incorporation of those new States into the existing international institutions. The United Nations, for example, has seen its membership multiplied manifold since its foundation sixty years ago. Can it work now? Can it be effective in providing answers to today's problems? One of the reasons for the current US unilateralism on the international stage and its reluctance to resort to the United Nations is the expanded number of States that have become members of it.

The relative erosion of the power of Governments

A second element of the post-Perestroika period is the fact that Governments have lost power to other players. In economic matters, for example, any Government's decision is subject to the scrutiny of the so-called markets. International Markets are so powerful that they can destabilize national economies.

The same applies to the contemporary workings of mass democracies, where all major decisions are taken as the result of a complex deliberation process in which the Government's interest is only one element within

a wider picture. NGOs have a bigger say, as has the voice of the representatives of specific interests, not to mention the mass media. Consumers and citizens shape public policy as much as Governments do. Can we then speak today of an abstract general will? Probably no, as group identities in terms of age, race, religion, gender, for example, are frequently more relevant to voters than collective issues of general interest to all.

It is only curious to note that the erosion of the power of States happens in tandem with the multiplication of the number of Sovereign States. This certainly spells trouble for global governance and contributes to thwarted hopes, to an increased sense of frustration in the new States.

Issues have become increasingly global

The third relevant development in the post-Perestroika world is the growing trans-border nature of most relevant issues on the international agenda. This is not a new phenomenon, but it has gained speed over the past two decades. Terrorism, protection of the environment, migration of people, drug-trafficking are only a few instances of questions of primary importance that cannot be dealt with by any country in isolation.

While problems have become more international in scope, our institutions are still essentially the same ones we had founded sixty years ago: they remain intergovernmental in nature and not entirely open to hear other voices representing segments of society at large; with expanded memberships and a slow-decision making process, they are ill-equipped to respond to the challenges of our troubled times that are increasingly global.

III - Conclusion: The need for Democratic Global Governance

I now come to my concluding remarks. The reality of today's international relations is an explosive cocktail at first sight.

Let us see: we have an expanded number of States that are relatively weakened in their power to implement their will, as opposed to a stronger and more outspoken society; and those States have to deal with issues that are no longer confined to their national borders, but cannot count on an effective and updated system for global governance that really works and can deliver concrete solutions consistently.

This is not a rosy picture. Global challenges will still be met by scattered answers for some years, I am afraid. But, at the same time, I know that we are in one of those transitional periods of History that are still incomplete and with a good deal of unfinished business. The time may be fast approaching when we will be entering a period where mechanisms for a truly global democratic governance would be in place. For, what we have today, is a crisis of governance in world affairs.

Thank you.