

The Challenges of our Current World Order

By

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being

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen
Dear friends

We are at the beginning of the 20th century. An uneasy peace reigns as the empires of the time look to each other with suspicion and enmity. The fact that the various royal houses of Europe are related by blood or marriage, does not seem to diminish the tensions. Tensions rise, and in the Balkans the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, by Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 provides the necessary spark for the conflagration to follow...

Before the armistice of 11 November 1918, the first World War would have seen more than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans, mobilized in one of the most murderous wars in history. Over nine million combatants and seven million civilians died as a result of that war. The Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were no more. So much for International Relations based on Power and interests alone...

From the Jazz Age to the great depression the next twenty years would see a drift, and a loss of confidence in Democracy, and the rise of the Fascists and the Nazis and the Communists.... Soon the stage was set again for another even more murderous war, the Second World War... which ended with the birth of the nuclear age.

The Second World War resulted in the death of some 70 – 75 million people, which was about 3% of the 1940 world population of about 2.3 billion. Of these some 50 million were civilians, including about 20 million from war-related disease and famine. Total combat deaths are estimated at 21 to 25 million, including deaths in captivity of about 5 million prisoners of war.

Surveying this massive global devastation, we saw the brilliance of American leadership at that time... Despite their unchallenged position at the pinnacle of the world, with the US heartland untouched by war, US manufacturing at the peak of its performance and the US economy representing some 50% of the global economy.... With American military forces dominating the world, their armies occupying Germany and Japan and American forces deployed all over the world, and the US being the only country that possessed nuclear weapons... with all this, the US political leadership did not pursue a path of unilateral nationalism, they pursued a path of multilateralism, with the creation of the UN, the Bretton Woods System, and above all the revolutionary concept of investing in their erstwhile enemies to make them their friends... And Germany and Japan have become among the closest US allies over the next 70 years. The US leadership also famously proposed the Marshall Plan. And in the rise of the cold war, they proposed the containment of the USSR – which led to the Cold War, a less than happy situation but infinitely better than a hot war between the world's nuclear powers.

International relations in a framework of multilateralism and a system of international institutions and laws worked markedly better than a nationalistic world order based on power and self-interest only.... And this global construct was to be reinforced by the Atlantic Alliance, while the European genius would manifest itself in the creation of the EU.

But that post-war international order is once more in disarray. The tectonic plates of the old world order are in the process of shifting...

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989-1991, which appeared to consolidate the post WW2 order, was only a temporary respite in the expanding shifts, faults and fissures... China is emerging as a new giant flexing its muscles, a resurgent Russia is asserting its presence around its borders and in the Mediterranean, Europe which had achieved so much in the building of the EU is suddenly feeling the tug of nationalist sentiment that threatens that very construction.

In some fault lines, the tremors and the earthquakes have been followed by the flows of lava that emerged, unchecked, seemingly unstoppable and destroying all in their passage, leaving desolation and destruction in their wake, which is what is happening in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Muslim World is suffering deep cleavages within itself as well as between it and the rest of the world. Other fissures and faults are emerging and expanding. The latent volcanic activities underneath are bubbling to the surface, as we see terrorism beginning to strike everywhere.

All the tension that the Arab world is witnessing has violently cast its shadows over many countries, and what is currently taking place in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Libya, underlines the need for people like myself to critically ask ourselves one question: Why did our countries—Arab and Muslim countries—become a breeding ground for extremist thought and barbaric violence?

Americans must ask themselves why there is so much anger at the prevailing political order in the well-established democracy? Europeans should also start asking themselves why is there such disenchantment with the magnificent European construction that so inspired past generations? Why is there a rise of nationalist sentiment and ethnic concern? Why do children of immigrants, born and raised in Europe, find the monstrous ideology of *Da'ish* attractive? What should Europe do to deal effectively with its new minorities and with adherents to Islam, its second religion?

These my friends are a few of the many questions that we are gathered here to explore together.... to reflect on and to seek to learn from each other's insights that we may better contribute in our home countries to the debates that will see the continuing transformation of the system of international relations, especially in this era of rapid technological change, global connectivity and a rising generation for whom many of the lessons of history have receded into the dim memories of bygone eras...

I wish you all a wonderful stay, and an enjoyable forum.

Thank you.