THE PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS IN THE NEW HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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The New Historical Context

Not ah historical periods are equally significant. The sudden collapse of the Soviet world and, with it, the Cold War, has ushered in a new historical phase[1]. The unexpected upheavals in Eastern Europe have deconstructed (in the sense of the French philosopher Derrida) and reconstructed the great dilemmas of the past, affecting entire peoples and nations in extraordinarily significant ways. Restating Bachelard's dictum about the present shedding light on the past, today's world allows us a glimpse into the future. Everywhere we have witnessed yearnings for democracy and freedom which, once achieved, will expand human potential in many ways. This appears to be the beginning of a new chapter in human civilization.

But these changes by no means herald the definitive triumph of freedom over tyranny, nor have we seen the end of history, as Fukuyama has argued. Such claims, recalling nineteenth century progressivism, of which Marxism was the legitimate heir, have a quaint ring to them today. There will never exist teleology to guide humanity along its path: history will take its course, with collective will, individual intelligence, and the ethical codes that we may develop.

The strategic military threat has all but disappeared, introducing the prospect of radically greater levels of international cooperation. As we have witnessed, both nuclear and conventional arms reduction agreements are now more feasible than ever. A concept of security is evolving that does not rest on the capacity to obliterate the enemy, but rather on international agreements and the rule of law, as well as economic prosperity, social justice and fortifying the democratic order among nations.

The New International Organizations

International organizations must play a more constructive role in the management of international relations. The United Nations, stili the central international coordinating body, is the appropriate place to reconsider the old idea of an international government. In order to advance steadily in this direction, the UN must modernize its management structure and streamline its decision-making processes, both of which will require changes in its political character as weil. While differences among countries cannot be brushed aside, and the great nations will not be likely to relinquish their status, there are encouraging signs that new agreements can be reached based on reason and the greater good, rather than on the convenience of certain powers.

The New Hegemony

Belligerent responses to conflict tend to distort reality. Local issues are manipulated by warring factions, who frame their solutions in terms of global confrontation. The current situation has created a new type of political and military hegemony capable of more effectively preventing or resolving conflicts held over from the past.

That hegemony, although it is the result of a force position, can induce peace accords among local or regional factions. In the short term, such pressure should be brought to bear by the United Nations, by existing regional security organizations (although they often suffer from the same maladies that plague the United Nations as a whole), or by local initiatives and ad hoc commissions, which can involve the parties in conflict or concerned third parties[2].

Economic Competition and the Ghost of Military Confrontation

Strategic military competition between the two blocs has given way to a multipolar world characterized by economic and teleological competition, the hallmark of the new world order. Nonetheless, this is no guarantee that the world will never again experience a global or internationally extended military confrontation. Before World War II there was a multi-polar world, the war opened Cold War and a bi-polar world which was stable during 4O years. Saperstein developed a mathematical model which compares bi-polar and tri-polar competition, arriving at the conclusion that the latter would be less stable than the former one. That is to say, a more complex world opens more possibilities for international instability.[3] We should not forget that economic rivalry among the great powers was the central cause of World War 1, even though the historical context is different. The specter of a superior nation or ethnic group and chauvinism will always haunt us.

In order to reduce this threat, many things must occur. In the first place, regulations promoting fair play within the context of healthy competition, designed to prevent economic tensions from breaking out into political or military confrontations, should be developed or improved. Economic wars that serve the interests of one nation while greatly darn aging others should be discouraged. A happy medium should be sought.

This is also a propitious moment to redefine the role of the military and transfer of many of its functions to civilian institutions. International agreements can play a role in curbing military power. It is not true that economic growth means bigger military expending or vice versa; military expending depends on too many factors[4]. Reduction of weapons arsenals and military budgets, reorganization of military structures, and international agreements that stipulate coordinated actions to create an irreversible astrosphere of collaboration, are essential.

On the other hand, the increase in democratic regimes does not mean reduction of attitudes towards war and confrontation between nations.[5]

Sources of Conflict within the New Global Context

There are five major sources of global instability that have the potential to generate conflict in the current period. These are:

- Underdeveloprnent and inequality of opportunity arming nations;

- The existence of political regions that repress minority nationalities or ethnic groups, generating conflicts over collective rights, independence or control of territory;

- The persistent desires for regional, political, military, economic or religious hegemony or influence on the part of certain political figures;

- Premature societies that continue to tolerate a dominant role for the military or other sectarian factions in civil society; and

- the existence of military arsenals and an arms industry that exerts considerable economic and political influence.

Elements of these causes are found in all military conflicts. The relationship between poverty, the immaturity of democratic institutions and the existence of an entrenched military sector explains much of the instability experienced by some Third World countries today.

The Destabilizing Effect of Poverty

While the gap between rich and poor countries may begin to narrow in the near future, the dominant trend has been in the opposite direction. In terrns of economic as well as scientific and technological progress, rich countries have out-distanced poor ones. Without internationally coordinated actions, this gap is going to be expanded even more. The cail for more opportunities for developing nations is not only out of ethical considerations or appeals to human solidarity. It will have considerable practical reunifications for all nations, particularly the most technologically advanced[6].

Underdevelopment generates poverty, which has significant consequences for developed countries[7], such as massive migratory flows to developed countries, with their attendant ethnic and nationalist tensions and economic deterioration; political instability and sodal upheaval, products of national decomposition. All of these conditions hinder stable and mutually beneficial economic relations with countries that possess most of the tth's natural wealth. Further consequences of poverty indude global ecological imbalances, the result of incorrect niodels of developrnent and of desperate and wasteful Uses of natural resources - remember the Amazon.

The Third World[8] as a concept has no rneaning in the absence of the Second World, if indeed it ever made sense to lump together countries so economically, politically ant culturally dissimflar. The prevailing development paradigms in the post-communist era, apart from being economicist (just like Marxism), are liberal and monetarist, and as such their value as an universal antidote is dubious. The collapse of comrnunisrn as a social model and the inertia and theoretical inability of social dernocracy to generate a different model of development opened up the field to this kind of reductionist and dogrnatic.

The world is waiting for a new concept of development and a different social Stlategy that advocates economic progress and the curbing of social contradictions and áflevlation of poverty at the sarne time.

International financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, are stiIl 1mating responses characteristic of the post-war period and the Cold War, without Iking into consideration not only the new historical context, but the differences between S1Ons and nations. Sorne of the changes required have recently been articulated in the World Bank by the Japanese representatives, who have stated that the liberalization and Pflvatization policies that guided the Bank's structural adjustrnent prograrnmes in the 1980s, cause costly social problems in underdeveloped countries without sustainable economic national development. State intervention in sorne sectors then becomes inevitable, generating investments which protect them from having to compete under conditions which in many cases they have no possibility of dealing with. The Japanese proposal ernphasizes the importance of making more effective distinctions between Third World countries, and it

supports a credit policy oriented towards reducing poverty. This radically different vision of the policy of international financial institutions will take time to institute.

International philanthropy, as well as economic support gained for strategic or ideological reasons, must give way to an effective and sustainable international affirmative action policy. Rather than handing out food, we must teach the poor to flsh, and remove the obstacles in their path. Sorne of the steps to be taken in this direction indude supporting the productive processes of less-developed countries attempting to enter into the world rnarket by creating appropriate development models that rnake efficient use of local resources, and eliminating barriers to access to international rnarkets. We have seen how the free trade and anti-protectionist banners have been waved hypocritically by a number of the developed against the less-developed countries, in the form of tariffs, quotas, and other restrictive measures. As Oscar Arias, former President of Costa Rica, has recently said "there is a double moral. Other steps include generating capital flows towards Third World countries under conditions beneficial to them, and ceasing debt-renegotiation arrangements that slow the development of these nations.

Strengthening civilian institutions in less-developed countries involves modernizing the armed forces and transferring their current functions to civilian bodies; supporting a democratic, constitutional order that grants all members of society their civil rights and right to live under the rule of law; supporting an independent judiciary; strengthening democratic culture and the search for consensus in the resolution of social conflicts; the broadening of cultural, scientific-technological, educational and public health spheres. In order to achieve these goals, political will, sufficient resources and constant collaborative efforts will be required.

International affirmative action is merely one component of a development strategy for Third World countries. The other components will remain in the hands of each country.

Since the League of Nations, the central concern of the UN has been peace. The new imperative is development and the prosperity of nations, which will constitute the most powerful assurance of a lasting peace in the decades to come.

The Problem of Nationalities

In every region there exists a correlation between administrative and political units, on the one hand, and nationalities as defined by ethnic group, culture, language, and religion on the other. Despite the mostly peaceful decolonization process of the post- World War II era, no one can deny that the European colonization of the Third World was carried out in violation of human, political and civil rights. For example, the definition of African borders during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (the Conference of Berlin) was made without taking into consideration the feelings, viewpoints, cultural ties or aspirations of the Africans. The colonialist experience of forcibly dividing nations generated a mosaic of problems that will remain with us for a long time.

In some instances, one country denies equality of opportunity to an entire national group; in other, a piece of one nation is located within another country, and the latter refuses to relinquish the territory occupied by the minority. In the flrst case, the conflicts are limited to one country; in the second, the problem takes on a regional character. The case of the nationalities in what was the Soviet world is merely an example of this type of problem. The shaking bose from the totalitarian mantle of the communjst apparatus has allowed nationalist tensions and rivalries to emerge, which in other parts of Europe have been brought under control or reduced.

Adding the element of religion to social or national conflicts fiirther complicates mafters. The secularization of politics is decisive for the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Unfortunately, this is difficult in areas where fundamentalism and extremism are significant social forces.

Respect for cultural self-preservation, self-determination, territorial status if desired, iii the constitution, is another decisive element. In this sense, Canada, Switzerland, and Finland have observed this principIe, while the Sudan and Yugoslavia have not.

When a coercive solution has been applied to an ethnic conflict, that is, anything from the extermination or expulsion of the population to institutionalized discrimination and forced assimilation, the consequences have been destructive in the escalation of violence. The only truly human and rational option involves avoiding the use of force. This includes, depending on the country: agreements involving federalism, decentralization and regional autonomy; or structural arrangements designed to reduce the disparities among groups, creating incentives for inter-ethnic cooperation and the Institutionalization of structures that prevent the domination of one group by another.

The Nature of Contemporary Conflicts

Contemporary conflicts tend to be regional in nature. They are caused by tension among two or more countries of a region, two nationalities, a social sector and a government, a national niinority and a country, but due to the scale of the conflict, there j.littie danger that it will escalate into a world conflagration as in previous years. The Persian Gulf war itself is an example of this. Despite the international military presence, it was always a regional conf]ict. Moreover, in the post-1945 era, the majority of conflicts have involved sub-national groups in danger, fighting for what they considered to be their rights or their self-preservation,their potentialities, self-deterrnination and resistance to institutionalized discrimination. The factional struggle in Lebanon is evidence of this. The struggle of the Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, as in the case of the nationalities in the former USSR, the conflicts in Ethiopia, the Sudan, Yugoslavia, are further examples.

The Issue of Human Rights

Often human rights have been understood in merely individual terrns. This has been the focus of the classical, liberal tradition of human rights. For earplug, this is appears in the Magna Carta of 1215, in the American BilI of Rights, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. This perspective on human rights, however, has been e product of ethnically (or supposed to be) homogenous societies. If we broadened J.ir Understanding of human rights to include sectors of a nation, we would condude bat the majority of contemporary conflicts can be reduced to violations of human rights.

In this sense, the universality of human rights makes possible the introduction of a moral dimension to modern conflcts. This adds an extra complication. Actions become morally 'good' or 'bad', reducing possibilities for a practical agreement between parties. Under such conditions, actions of third parties need to be carried on by taking sides, and therefore such participation will not be accepted by ah the actors involved in the conflict. This points out the need for supports and the creation of international institutions aiming to properly define and protect human rights.

Conflicts which are basically violations of human or civil rights are not exclusive to countries in the Southern hemisphere. Northern Ireland is a case in point. The conflict there is attributed to discrimination against the catholic minority by the protestant majority, in

which there are violations of the right to free association, against unlawful detention and the right to a fair trial. The recent racial violence in the United States is an expression of intranational conflict related to the discrimination felt by the black population in that country.

There is no correlation between the observance of civil and political rights and demographic, economic variables, educational levels or religious affiliation.

On the other hand, respect for human rights in the midst of a conflict may help to prevent its escalation.

Lessons from Sorne Recent Conflicts

The achievement of peace in Nicaragua in 1989 is not very illustrative of current conditions, because certain decisive geopolitical conditions played a central role at that time, although an ad hoc regional commission formed by the Central American presidents also played an important role.

Analysing the international strife in what was Yugoslavia, as well as in the Southern region of the former Soviet Union, several factors are evident, including:

- contradictions among countries and nationalities;
- the historical nature of the conflict, as revealed in the cruelty of the warring parties;
- the difficulties experienced by the parties in arriving at a mutually satisfactory agreement;
- the inability of the international community, especially Europe, to play a decisive role in reducing the bloodshed and destruction; and
- the weaknesses and inefficiency of international organizations (starting with the UN) in the resolution of the conflict.

It is evident that neither the EC nor USA has wanted to assume the leadership in an international peacemaking effort, revealing the weakness of the UN, which depends on the political will of the world powers created at Potsdam and Yalta.

In the case of the El Salvador peace agreements, which still have not been complied with, we can make several observations. First of ail, the blind alley which the new historical phase represents for opposing bands forged within the context of the East-West conflict; the difflculties remaining in achieving the process of execution of the agreements without constant external support. At the same time, we observe the successful presence of regional mediation created by the Central American republics, in which Oscar Arias and the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Development played a significant role; and the meeting between the bands, the peace conference, under the mantie of the CAS and the UN; the weakness in the monitoring and control of compliaflce with the accords.

The Cambodian peace agreement appears to have been a clear success for the UN, which was able to integrate all the parties to the conflict in one way or another. International mediation was respected by all the parties, and there was an open mmd and a future-orientation on the part of the factions in conflict. The weakening of the Influence of Vietnam, thanks to the fall of the Soviet world, was also an important element. The most decisive factor in the Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement on the Cambodia Conflict, signed in Paris in October 1991, was the 'tranquillity' of China, which obtained what has been its main interest in the region since many years ago: political and military hegemony.[9]

The Persian Gulf War revealed many things: the existence of a latent, centuries-old conflict between the Islamic and the Western world, cultural and national and territorial differences. Some people never learn that Islam is not just a religion in the Western Christian sense, but a complete cultural, religious, political and social system. Western military and political hegemony and the submission of the ex-Soviet world to it; an international gang organized through the UN, which escalated its actions to massive military intervention; the existence of national rulers in search of regional influence willing to accept the death of hundreds of thousands of citizens and enormous destruction; the insufficiency of military action to resolve deflnitively the sources of conflict in this region of the world; and the weakness of an organism such as the United Nation, which being necessarily backed up by military action on the part of the great powers, the USA and its allies, lost control of the ongoing actions.

Although the formal cause of the Persian Gulf War was the protection of the legitimate sovereignty of Kuwait and its borders, obviously the Western world's wiflingness to intervene in such a massive way had to do with the presence of essential petroleum deposits in the region. Neither democracy nor sovereignty nor social welfare could compete with the interest of ensuring control over crude oil supply, mainly to Europe and Japan.

The need to conduct negotiations, peace agreements in which all parties are satisfled, and systematic vigilance over these agreements, requires the creation of apecialized organisms with trained persons devoted to the prevention and resolution of conflict.

The flrst methodological premise is the recognition that each conflict is different; it la not possible to resort to laws of history or society to resolve conflicts. There is no universal ideological prescription.

The resolution of contemporary conflicts requires a combination of simultaneous acts Which are not always successful. The cessation of war requires a ceasefire, the transformation of the war scenario into a political one, an agreement on the mechanisms participation in political power (that is, internationally supervised free and honest

elections), an irpjnediate end to military aid to alI parties, the voluntary maintenance of a balance of forces, and support of the peace process on the part of external actors. In general, the following actions must occur in the resolution of any conflict: negotiations between all the parties involved; Support for the negotiations on the part of the UN or a recognized regional Organization; the presence of ad hoc groups respected by the parties and capable of encouraging negotiated initiatives.

Once agreement is reached:
 - the monitoring and control of the implementation of the accords;
 - economic, political, social and technical measures that support the implementation of the agreement.

Should the parties persist in maintaining the conflict, the international community must decide the actions to be followed that will lead to negotiations. We are in an historical phase in which it is possible to exert pressure with broad international backing. This can include diplomatic and political pressure (public condemnations, isolation, and so on) and economic pressure; at the same time, the international community must analyse the appropriateness of military action. Without any doubt, there must be created a new

international protocol which permits the United Nations to apply international pressure to parties to a dispute.

In order for this pressure to be valid and credible, UN policy must be aboye existing geopolitical relations of force, and it must enjoy the respect and support of all nations. Obviously, this would require a reassessment of international law as well as the concept of national sovereignty.

Notes

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[9] See, R. (1991). *China and the Cambodian Peace Process*, Asian Survey, Vol XXXI, No 12. pp1170-1185.