A New International System?

by Giandomenico Picco

Those who hoped to see the end of ideologies and dogmas after the collapse of the Soviet Union were disappointed within a decade. Ideologies and dogmas are back in full force in the international political arena, as demonstrated by their resurgence in many domestic polities. The world lost another opportunity to give preferential treatment to facts. Indeed, what is sad is that, as in the days of secular ideologies, many cannot be bothered by facts. Polarization has emerged again as a leading force in several parts of the world. As in the times where ideologies were triumphant, the world is today profoundly affected by those who claim to be in sole possession of the truth.

The Coexistence of Asymmetry and "One Superpower"

The polarization during the Cold War began to fade well before 1991. I would submit that in that context the Cold War came to an end some five years earlier. It was during the autumn of 1986 that a little-remembered change in international affairs came to pass. For the first time ever, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, China, and France—met among themselves as a caucus of a sort, without the presence of the non-permanent members. The new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, had much to do with this, for he initiated changes in the foreign policy of his country as well as altering Moscow's involvement in the UN. Gorbachev said as much when addressing the Afghan nightmare and indeed the Soviet Union demonstrated this change by moving forward the negotiations on their withdrawal from that Central Asian country. Although these shifts are suggestive of major changes in the world system, it was another conflict that brought the Security Council's Permanent Members around a "cup of tea" in October 1986: the conflict between Iraq and Iran. Appearing as the premier item on the agenda of Security Council meetings, it marked a first in Cold War history; for it was the first regional conflict in which both East and West, Moscow and Washington, supported the same side: Saddam Hussein. In 1988 both the agreements for the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan and the end of the Iran-Iraq conflict were achieved.

By 1991, a common set of interests and approaches had emerged among the major powers. As the new Russia took the place of the USSR, there were hopes that

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ideologies would be confined to the dustbin of history. The dream lived on for a few years, although it was challenged during the crisis in the Balkans. With the Cold War officially over, some interpreted the first part of the 1990s as a clear indication of victory—or defeat, depending on geographic perspective. Apparently, only a few felt that the international system could have been one in which facts could prevail over dogmas. Although it seemed the potential was there, it was not to be.

The concept of enemy, an old management tool of power, was again invoked. This time it emerged in a cultural and religious context. In 1992 Usama bin Laden told a high-level Saudi official that, having destroyed one major infidel—the Soviet Union—in Afghanistan, he was now going to defeat the other one, the US. In the Balkans, the issue of religious identity was brought to the forefront not just in politics but in war. And more, much more, was yet to come.

The search for a new international system, comprised of the five permanent members working together, was almost set aside as the search for new enemies—real or imagined—continued in earnest. And enemies must be at least perceived as "real" if they are to serve their purpose: no wonder that religious and "civilization" connotations were given to represent the new enemies.

To some extent, the disappearance of the East-West divide and the march towards globalization offered an opportunity for a more interdependent world. On September 11, 2001, the definition of a "unipolar world" assumed a rather different meaning. To be sure, the term was mostly used to indicate the imbalance existing in the international scene. The reality however was that globalization had brought with it a new world, the world of asymmetry. Asymmetry was, in a way, a challenge to the simplistic "one superpower" image. In the past, the "large" held influence over the "small," but now the opposite could also be true. Perhaps the anti-globalization movement has missed a major part of the meaning of this phenomenon: the empowerment of the "small" to attack, retaliate against, and affect the "large." Clearly globalization came about in stages. It could have been the environment and the threat of contagious diseases that first brought to the forefront the fact that we live in an interconnected world; but economics and finance have surely shown that we all affect each other. Those who had missed it would realize after September 11, 2001, that, at the basic level of security, globalization also meant asymmetry.

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In actuality, the US can be harmed without its enemy touching a square inch of its soil. For example, if the demand for oil is effectively equal to the production, creating little spare capacity as is currently the case, a shutdown for whatever reason of one million barrels a day over a period of several weeks by any producer or a

combination of producers would create a chain reaction that would strike at the very heart of many Western societies. Similarly, a terrorist attack against oil tankers would cost more than just the price of a fully loaded ship. The economic cost would be compounded by the unpredictability induced by "fear and uncertainty." This "fear and uncertainty" is figured into the price of many commodities, and Western societies are at the mercy of a few well-organized individuals who can use it if they so choose. Financial markets factor in the "terror premium," thus implicitly accepting the effect of the actions of small groups on world economy.

Financial markets have come to be seen as the engine of modern societies, much more than the engine of one single nation. Yet they do not feel immune to the possible attacks that a non-state actor (read a terrorist group) may perpetrate through a variety of means. When the Asian financial crisis struck in 1997, the markets of the world trembled. Strangely enough, it all began in Thailand, a country not known as a major power. A monetary crisis in a colony of the British Crown affecting the markets in London would have been unthinkable only a century earlier.

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Furthermore, how much of the critical infrastructure is protected or protectable? Since we live in societies that are interconnected, our critical hubs are also interconnected. Cyber-security and energy security can be targeted and reached by "small actors" seeking to threaten the international scene. The size of the danger has no relation to the size of the potential perpetrator of the attack.

Asymmetry does not mean terrorism alone. It means that a mistake by an individual who is part of the system could accidentally provoke a chain reaction that might affect many in a very short time. Asymmetry includes the hubs of our critical infrastructures that are not only connected but are also vulnerable to mismanagement and involuntary mistakes of large consequences. Access to information, real-time communication, and cyberspace allow small entities, be them states or not, to affect global reality. Asymmetry implies a lower level of predictability and an increased complexity of risks management at almost all levels: nation-states, institutions, corporations, and individuals.

The history of Afghanistan over the last few years is a case of asymmetry in progress. During the Taliban regime (which emerged from the civil war that followed the collapse of the Najibullah regime in 1992), the failed state of Afghanistan showed the world—through its exportation of drugs and Al Qaeda terrorism—how a rather small entity could affect more people than just the population living within its own territory. Indeed, as a failed state in the early 1990s, Afghanistan was considered

inconsequential; thus it was "abandoned" and forgotten by the West, though not by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Its size and remoteness misled many; but an asymmetric world gave Afghanistan a chance to affect a large part of the globe.

Effective NGOs—a group of unelected, self-appointed individuals—have become able to dictate the agenda of the international society and to force changes in the behavior of large corporations or even nation-states. From Greenpeace to Amnesty International, these entities have shown a level of power outside the framework of institutions which was unheard of thirty years ago. Indeed, unofficial groups are playing increasingly more effective and influential roles in the very domain of, and once limited to, governments. Diplomacy, one of the last monopolies of a government, is now accessible to and performed by NGOs as well as individuals who have one main characteristic: credibility. Although unprecedented in previous decades, the role of second-track diplomacy and successful negotiations by private organizations is another facet of asymmetry.

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For those who believed that we had moved from a bipolar to a hegemonic world, asymmetry may be a disturbance of sorts. It appears, however, that asymmetry is likely to be an indefinite component in the world as it is driven by the very globalization that seems to fuel the powerful. The strong may be stronger, but some of the very weak have also become better able to influence, affect, and be taken into account by so many.

Alignments Rather Than Alliances

The bipolar world did leave the impression at first that old alliances had been made superfluous, and that a single global alliance may have been in the making. Just ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, to claim as an obvious observation that the "victorious" Western alliance had been altered would be to understate the point.

The world of alliances required "allies" to be united on every front and on every issue: indeed they were ideological alliances based on philosophies and, arguably, on dogmas. But the world of the 1990s began to show that the euphoria of the early post–Cold War years was not to last. The unity of the Western alliance was tested in the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, and now in Iraq. However, trade issues, environmental matters, and human rights concerns have already shown that even the "Western allies" had chosen a more pragmatic approach to their "alliance."

No longer would friends blindly support the choices of their allies on every issue, which is more strictly the sense of an ally; instead, the alliance became more "à la carte." Alliance on an issue-by-issue basis is more properly called "alignment." The

Iraqi situation brought this change to the forefront with considerable controversy. NATO was indeed enlarged, but divergence of views among its members was never so stark. Many looked at this in a negative light; harsh words were exchanged, even among "allies," and relations seemed to become sour within the same "alliance." Unanimity of views on issues affecting the globe, or at least a large part of it, may be seen by many as the most hopeful sign of the new times, but I would submit that the "world of alignments" may have its advantages. Indeed, it forces everyone to work harder at relations rather than take them for granted. It also opens up the world to what I would call a better environment for "international democracy," a world where each is valued on a case-by-case basis and where each is really asked about its role and opinion on each case. The automaticity of the alliance seems to have vanished as different alignments have developed around different issues. Being friends no longer means agreeing on everything friends do. Indeed, friendship at the international level may be gained or lost every day.

Alliances are less likely to develop for another reason: the lack of clarity over the concept of "enemy." Terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, drug trafficking, and poverty have each been named at various points in history as the enemy of our time. Clearly the "allies" have prioritized them differently. To imagine alliances with total solidarity among their members when each perceives the threat rather differently is perhaps unrealistic. Moreover, "allies" have shown, in many cases, divergences on the approaches to a specific threat even when there is agreement on the perception of the threat.

The partners of alignments, as opposed to alliances, choose when to side with each other and when to disagree. This choice may well be a feature of societies that no longer feel that their very existence is threatened. Interestingly enough, the US and Russia seem to feel the terrorist threat as an existential one. On the other hand, the European electorate is rather less sure that they have been targeted in a conflict that undermines the very existence of their societies.

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Beyond terrorism, another reason for the emergence of alignments and the fading away of alliances is perhaps the economic trends prevailing in the US and Europe. Europe and the US have had different views on a number of trade matters, financial and business issues, as well as regulatory questions. This should not be surprising, since the two sides of the Atlantic have been developing two different kinds of capitalist societies: shareholder capitalism in the US and stakeholder capitalism in Europe. The economic priorities of the two societies do not completely coincide, thus offering different responses to problems. This is especially notable since the

European Union is a larger unit today than it was twenty years ago as the European Community, and its economic integration is more advanced. The all-for-one-and-one-for-all alliances of the past would appear to be over, having been replaced by more realistic alignments whose members make decisions on an issue-by-issue basis.

The Return of Ideologies

If asymmetry and alignments would appear to push the international scenario towards pragmatism and even more international democracy, another trend is pulling in the opposite direction. Since the political ideologies of the Cold War faded away, a new set of dogmas have entered domestic politics in some quarters of the world. Dogmas with religious connotations were used in the Balkan wars, in the Caucasus conflict, in the Afghanistan civil infighting during both the pre-Taliban civil war and the Taliban regime, in the civil tensions in India, and in Sudan. Religion re-entered the political scene of conflict in many areas, and in various parts of the globe some began to use the religious divide either as an explanation or as a tactic. The religious dimension of Al Qaeda and other groups that use violence against innocents as a tool of war and politics provided an entire *weltanschauung* based on dogmas and on a new ideology.

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The revival of fundamentalism of various kinds from the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu worlds encouraged several politicians to bring new ideologies with heavily religious tones into the political fray. Political actions, not to speak of wars and terrorist activities, began to be justified or at least explained through religious discourse. As dogmas cannot be negotiated or compromised, polarization has emerged both within nations and at the international level.

Within ten years of its demise, the polarization of the Cold War was replaced by another kind of polarization. To be sure, we are not yet in a totally polarized world because a large number of countries and groups have not accepted this kind of template for our world as unavoidable. But civilizational, religious, and cultural divides have become embedded in our daily perceptions, our lingo, and even our *weltanschauung*.

In a way, the ideologies of the past were secular in nature; however, today they are full of religious overtones. The use of religious references by political leaders and other actors on the international scene has become another regular motif of the domestic politics in several countries. Ironically, this is becoming more common despite years of conflicts where religion appeared to have been part of the problem and not part of the solution. If secular ideologies are, per se, based on pre-established interpretation of events yet to happen, ideologies with religious connotations are

clearly based on dogmas. Considering the ongoing major conflicts, it is possible that only those in sub–Saharan Africa seem to be devoid of religious overtones, though some tensions and civil unrest in that area are also connected to religious issues.

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It may be hard to tell whether the revival of ideologies with religious overtones is a reaction to the homogenization process resulting from globalization; or whether their revival is a conscious or unconscious search for identity in the face of migrations from the South to the North and cultural flows from the North to the South; or whether it is the result of a primitive fear engendered by rapid change. It would appear however that the revival of both religious ideologies in the Islamic world and political ideologies strongly tainted by Christian fundamentalism in the West are raising questions within each of their respective worlds about their own real identities. In other words, who speaks for these worlds? Who speaks for the West? Is it the fundamentalist Christians in the US, the Orthodox zealots of the Balkans of Srebrenica fame, or the secular intellectuals of Europe? Likewise, who speaks for the Arab world? Is it the *takfiri* of Usama bin Laden or the authors of the UNDP Arab development reports?

The very idea of "dialogue among civilizations" launched by the United Nations in 1998 as a response to the "clash of civilizations" theory of the early 1990s did not find fertile ground even after 9/11. It was thought at that time that the "dialogue" could become a convenient "anti-terrorist manifesto." There were, however, no takers at the government level for this approach. I did assume then, and have no reason to believe otherwise today, that the very use of the "dialogue among civilizations" as an anti-terrorist manifesto implied the search for a common global narrative.

But it became clearer and clearer that the divides of culture and religion, as imagined by those who cultivate dogmatic visions of the world, could not tally with the vision of a global narrative. Indeed the new ideologies, like the old ones, rely on the existence of divisions, so that bridging divides may simply be an existential impossibility. Thus, polarization within countries where ideologies prosper (whether they are called such or not does not matter) has also clearly increased.

Terrorism itself has become more ideological over the last ten years, exposing us to what I call "strategic terrorism." For decades prior, however, we have been accustomed to dealing with "tactical terrorism." From the IRA to Hezbollah, terrorist acts have been used as a "tactic" to achieve a political objective which was clearly defined and known, unchangeable, and in some cases, even politically negotiable. These terrorist groups also engage in negotiations with the "enemy," either directly or through intermediaries, and more importantly, their social base was and is firmly

rooted in a specific area where they exist. They are very careful to keep their number of enemies as few as possible (usually one or two groups or nations). These groups that engage in tactical terrorism can survive even without the "enemy" because of their other role as social actor in a given setting.

By contrast, "strategic terrorists" of the Al Qaeda type have changing political objectives, unclear at times, and one universal objective: the establishment of a world Caliphate without infidels. They are known to neither have had any negotiations with the "enemy," nor have they sought any. They have had no qualms about making more and more enemies for themselves as the list of countries attacked by these groups has now grown very long. Their overarching definition of "enemy" seems to include just about anyone (as the *takfiri* base of their ideology clearly indicates). They offer no jobs, social infrastructures, or economic growth to any specific social group in a given country. Thus, they are not stakeholders in any society. As their ideology indeed indicates, their primary need is a perpetual enemy, for without an enemy they would effectively negate their existence. Al Qaeda's type of terrorism—based more on dogmatism than that of any other group—is in pursuit of a perpetual conflict, a real clash of civilizations. It feeds the *weltanschauung* of "us and them" based on unchallengeable dogmas.

What Next?

Interestingly, we may be closer to a world where like-minded people and groups across the globe find themselves more at ease with each other across these national and geographical divides than with some of their own compatriots. Various accusations are being leveled against those groups of individuals who believe in the global and interdependent reality of today and in the commonality of human ethical values across borders and divides. But while the extremes in every society are able to project a vision, no matter how absurd, the great majority of the "non-dogmatic" seem to be mute and unable to articulate their own vision. No wonder the extremes seek confrontation and even wars, for it is in such an atmosphere of conflict that the silent majority will find a diminished ability to build coalitions, propagate its values, and eventually marginalize the extremes.

On September 12, 2001, a sense of commonality and solidarity spontaneously emerged across the globe. Irrespective of religious and national divisions, a large majority of the world's peoples, perhaps the largest in memory, communicated with each other and openly shared a sense of common belonging. Since then, determined groups of ideologues have created more divides and deepened those already in existence. Is a coalition between the "non-dogmatic" of both the West and of the Islamic world still a possibility?