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The Impact of Changing Societies on the Future of International Relations

Cesare Merlini

Author's Note

This paper aims to take into consideration the influence exerted by societal change on international relations and to contemplate the extent to which trends in world affairs are related to the transformations taking place within societies across the globe. This line of inquiry was originally designed as the backbone of a larger research project. The objective was not only to identify salient trends that are likely to continue over the coming decades but also to draw from this analysis to further explore policy options for the West to seize these expected, transformative societal developments, on which it has often played a leading role. However, given limitations and a few health setbacks along the way, it was decided, at least for the present, to produce an abridgment of the analysis developed so far.

The following paper should thus be considered as a work in progress and subject to further elaboration and improvement. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not represent a position of the Brookings Institution. Although the analysis is the author's alone, the paper has benefitted greatly from the input of several

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Cesare Merlini is a nonresident senior fellow at the Center on the United States and Europe and chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Italian Institute for International Affairs (IAI) in Rome. His areas of expertise include transatlantic relations, European integration, nuclear nonproliferation (as his background is in nuclear science) and the impact of societal change on international relations

Introduction

For almost a decade now, the international outlook has evolved in ways that constitute a dramatic regression with respect to the predominantly positive trends taking place during the transition from the past century to the present one. In order to fully grasp the depth of such change let us first briefly recall just a few of these trends.

In the early 2000s, the Cold War was further left behind, because of the enlargement of the European Union and NATO to include countries that had been part of the Soviet bloc. At the same time doors for cooperative relations seemed to be opening with a Post-Soviet Russia which could be epitomized by the assumed rise to power of the reform-oriented Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow. New major world powers were emerging thanks to fast-growing economies in the framework of the global liberal system. This raised expectations that great nations such as China, India, and Brazil would join in the governance of globalization symbolized by the G-20. A new dynamism became manifest among the populations of the Arab countries, indeed the Muslim world at large, so as to generate pressure from below for authoritarian and patriarchal regimes to finally introduce change. The Turkish nation – Muslim, democratic, and a NATO partner – was undergoing reform and began negotiating accession to the European Union to represent an ideal bridge with the Western world.

Despite widespread perceptions of an ever more dangerous world heightened by the immediacy and sensationalism of media

reports, the military conflicts that dominated the twentieth century were now fewer in number and less bloody compared to those of the past.¹ Moreover, during the first decade of the present century, more than half a billion people escaped absolute poverty – mostly in China and India – de facto fulfilling one of the Millennium Goals set by the United Nations in the year 2000. Trade expansion in goods and services, as well as the free flow of investment, were the main engines of long-term growth, greatly enhancing interdependence among states. The transition seemed to extend beyond the geopolitical and economic contexts to include broad human behaviors and interactions. The apparent return of religion contributed to the de-sacralization of nation-states and of other secular collective entities perceived to have constrained personal identities and enhanced rootless conflict in the previous century. Above all, the number of functional democracies on the planet had been on the rise since the demise of the Soviet empire.²

At the same time, the complacency that had been nourished in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Europe after the demise of Cold War was giving way to more sober assessments. In fact, it became fashionable to talk about a decline of the West as compared to the rise of the Rest. Then the start of the new millennium was marked by a first in American history: a sophisticated

¹ For a historical survey of world conflicts and battle related deaths since 1946, see Center for Systemic Peace: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/conflictrends.html>.

² See: Polity IV, *Trends in Governance by World/Region: Global Trends in Governance* (Democracies, Anocracies, Autocracies).

terrorist attack on the nation's soil. The dramatic events of September 11, 2001 contributed to the perception of decreased U.S. control over international security, despite its unchallenged position at the apex of the global power hierarchy. In fact, no other major attacks followed the presumed turning point of 9/11, most of whose perpetrators were eventually punished. Some European cities were also severely struck by Islamist terrorism, without generating, however, a comparable mobilization, while the search for a new institutional architecture for the European Union contributed to its becoming more and more inward-looking; yet the bold enlargement of EU membership, and the arrival of the euro represented a remarkable historic achievement toward realizing the long-standing ambition of forging a Europe "whole, free and at peace".

Far-reaching and fast-paced transformations of human society were occurring simultaneously with these geostrategic developments, in a context of mutual influence. The dynamics of these transformations is the object of discussion in our analysis. As human society is a vast subject, this paper is focused primarily on three main areas: demographic change, with emphasis on declining fertility, aging and urbanization; civil advancement, i.e. spreading education, women's emancipation, the growth of civil society; and technological revolution, including interconnectivity. At the turn of the 21st century, all three of these areas experienced impressive evolutions on a global scale. Above all such dynamics appeared to converge towards standards the American, European, and other advanced societies

had already reached. Indeed Western decline was at most a relative one.

These transformative trends, however, have been seriously affected by disruptive occurrences that have taken place in more recent years, as stated at the beginning of this introduction. In a quick survey of the signs of regression, Russian President Vladimir Putin is entitled to the first place on the list of geopolitical revisionists. The annexation of Crimea, the relentless pressure on Ukraine and recent interventionism in Syria are each part of a broader revanchist pan-Russian nationalism. The implementation of this ideology has been given priority over the welfare of the Russian people, whose views have been guided by state-controlled media. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey seems intent on following in the footsteps of his counterpart in the Kremlin, along with an ever-larger cohort of strongmen that has risen to the world stage, often at the expense of the rule of law and the freedom of their subjects. Next, the new Chinese leadership appears to be chillingly inclined to go backward on civil society progress. At the same time, the aftershocks of the deepest economic recession since the Great Depression have contributed to the darkening of the global economic outlook and have made the path of the "rising economies," especially China, India and Brazil, increasingly uncertain.

Lastly, the sudden rise and dramatic fall of the Arab Spring, that had generated huge expectations in the area, has ended up where it all started, in tiny Tunisia. Most of the Islamic world is still torn by religious fanaticism and ethnic clashes, with outcomes often marked by unspeakable cruelty. The list of failed or nearly failed states in the Middle East

and North and Sub-Saharan Africa has been extended to include important bellwether countries such as Libya, Syria and Iraq. Civil wars in these countries have forced the affected populations to flee by the millions, mostly to neighboring countries. Increasingly, however, refugees are heading to Europe, an option that often implies extremely tough, and sometimes deadly, travels.

Turning to the West, the U.S. economy was severely affected for approximately half a decade by the 2008 financial crisis originating on Wall Street. That context, along with the unfinished business of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was an unwelcome cloud over the inaugural reception for the first black American President, Barack Obama. The combination of economic stringencies, the attempt to extricate from these previous disastrous interventions abroad and the need to confront the new mounting disruptions just listed above would constitute a daunting challenge for any leader. Barack Obama's caution, which occasionally appears to lean towards hesitation, has often been perceived as a lack of leadership and has helped Congress become dominated by Republicans, many of whom are hostile to liberal internationalism.

The Eurozone, for its part, was shaken to its very foundations. Furthermore, the mantra of the European process – integration – has increasingly been undermined in two respects: the various symptoms of lacking solidarity among member states; and the problematic social, civil and cultural inclusion of a growing immigrant population. The current crisis of Middle Eastern refugees and economic migrants flooding many EU countries provides a dramatic stress test of

integration on both respects, with nationalism, separatism, and xenophobic populism now on the rise.

Finally and broadly speaking, the whole transition suggests a weakening or sidelining of those international institutions that were founded under Western influence during the second half of the twentieth century. In sum, a less benign reading of the decline of the United States, and the West at large, may be justified today.

As suggested above, the purpose of this paper is to consider the specific influence exerted by societal change on international relations and, conversely, the degree to which mutable trends in world affairs, including their current regressive phase, interrelate with the transformations taking place across most societies. A brief reference is first made to the historical background of the thesis. Then the most significant aspects of what may be termed the global societal metamorphosis are the subject of a synthetic analysis with the intent of stressing those aspects that may provide new opportunities for international action. Finally, suggestions are put forth with the purpose of complementing American and European foreign policy making with innovative approaches that factor in the dynamics of these transformations.

A. Lessons to be Taken from History

The aforementioned regressive developments have become particularly evident in the course of 2014 and 2015. As a byproduct, additional light was cast on the centennial of the inception of the Great War, which has been the object in itself of much attention in

literature, media and entertainment over the last two years. Parallels and lessons taken from history have been a recurring theme. To say that 1914 was a milestone in human history may sound Eurocentric, but it is true nonetheless. Europe was indeed at the apex of its global dominance at the time, and it was also at the beginning of its dethronement.

However, that critical year should not be looked at in isolation. The debate on how prior events unfolded that led up to the outburst of hostilities was bound to include the issue of whether, seen from a distance, a war was inevitable or not. Those who believe it could have been avoided, frequently mention the personalities of the protagonists – emperors, kings, chancellors, marshals – and their “miscalculations.”³ It’s a view not exempt from Leo Tolstoy’s reading of history, according to which events are often the product of hazard. Those who side with inevitability, instead, usually point to the larger forces already at play well before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, the spark that famously ignited the war. Let us call “consequentiality” the view that major historical events predominantly unfold as a consequence of some previous preparatory developments. What *The Economist* had opined as far back as December 29, 1900, “Europe is no longer a moral unity, but a series of mutually jealous nationalities, competing with one another, and obliged to incur immense loss and waste

³ Henry Kissinger says, in his latest book: “[T]he war that overturned Western civilization had no inevitable necessity. It arose from a series of miscalculations...” See *World Order. Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, Penguin, 2014, p82.

by rival armaments and tariffs,” appears to come in support of this position.

Consequentiality appears to this author to be a more convincing driver of history than hazard or subjective miscalculations, and it is in this light that the recurrent reference to similarities and differences between now and the Great War era is seen. The emphasis on similarities is often instrumental to one’s assessment of the current state of affairs and to policy prescriptions for the world to come. Warnings about an undue reliance on the existing world order are a case in point. Indeed, history can repeat itself – or at least rhyme, as Mark Twain suggested; yet the view here is that differences largely prevail over similarities if one compares the present era with that of a century ago.

The world map of geopolitical actors, to start with, underwent major changes. A dozen empires dissolved, during the transition from the second half of the nineteenth to the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁴ The near simultaneity of their termination – four empires collapsed during or following WWI – is indicative of how rapidly the global context evolved. We now live in a world bereft of these transnational geopolitical entities that once dominated global affairs. Moreover, if many states that were important on the eve of the Great War are still in existence today⁵,

⁴ They were mostly European, including that of the Czars. But also the Qing Dynasty, the Ottoman Empire and the Empire of the Rising Sun were part of the lot – a lot without precedent in human history by the way.

⁵ Similarity may not always mean continuity, however. Germany and Russia currently hold positions in the international arena that are more similar to those they held at the start of WWI than to those held at the end of WWII, when the Third Reich was

several new players have acceded the world chessboard as the number of states around the world has quadrupled over the last hundred years. Above all, the global power hierarchy has changed and is no longer centered in the Old Continent.

In addition, while empires predominantly developed through territorial acquisition by force, conquest appears to be less of a historical determinant today than it has traditionally been throughout history.⁶ Great power wars are deemed unlikely in the present time, as warfare has undergone a profound transformation, including high fragmentation. While sub-state and transnational actors storm many troubled countries and spread ruthless factional or ethnic hatred, public opinion in most nations seems less war-prone than some one hundred years ago. Nationalism, an important driving force then, may still be active or even resurgent, but appears to be less tied to nation-states and ideologies while identity-related issues exert a growing influence on people.

Technology, as mentioned before, did undergo a major revolution over the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century by enhancing communication, transforming production and alleviating human labor. But the speed of change has shifted gears in the recent past both regarding geographical outreach and substitution of one technological transition with another. We will return to these new features of the world we live in and

annihilated and the Soviet Union was about to become a world superpower.

⁶ The case of Crimea is almost an exception that will be discussed later in the paper.

discuss their respective influences on how it will likely evolve in the near future. Now our bird's-eye survey of the historical background of our analysis needs completion.

The New Thirty Years' War

In fact, any evaluation one hundred years in retrospect should also look at how things evolved after the outbreak of the Great War. Let us mention just a few significant and well-known developments. The Russian revolution that ran more or less parallel to the conflict brought about the disappearance of one of the most powerful monarchies of the Old Continent. Then came the apparent peace of the Treaty of Versailles, the shortcomings of which would subsequently generate another debate on the (in)evitability of war – the one related to the next European clash. A decade or so after the war's end, the "Great" adjective would be coupled with yet another major occurrence, "Depression." Post-war sociopolitical disarray and the impact of the economic disaster helped generate the proper conditions for some dictators to take over their respective states, so as to contribute to the declining overall number of democracies during the intra-war period. Meanwhile, old and new colonial powers indulged in ruthless conquest and repression in distant lands.

And yet another revolution was in full swing, one that would deliver human advancement instead. Industrial development brought with it a major transformation of society – the most radical in human history at the time. A growing number of households became equipped with electricity, a telephone, a radio apparatus and a car. Inevitably, the ensuing lifestyle changes had important

political, economic and cultural ramifications. But science and technology were engaged in more than just telephones and cars. The “rival armaments” mentioned by *The Economist* at the start of the century, kept expanding and modernizing. The dynamics of world affairs had not changed, and war was once again bound to rear its ugly head.

The next titanic clash resulted in even greater tragedy than that of the Great War, which became more commonly known as the First World War. The geopolitical rationale of the Second World War, however, remained largely the same, based upon the rivalry of nation-states. It was only further exacerbated by the totalitarian nature of some of these states and the expansionist follies of a dictator at the center of the Old Continent. The carnage was staggering not only in quantitative terms but also because of the unprecedented ways, in which it was carried out. To the millions of combatants killed on the battlefields, one has to add the cumulative tens of millions, mostly civilians, who perished in cities razed by bombs – including two atomic bombs – or who were starved, gassed or otherwise decimated in concentration camps. In addition, multitudes of people were wounded, tortured, orphaned, or displaced. It would take decades after 1945 to fully grasp all that had happened during the Second World War and its related atrocities. Although predominantly focused on the aberrant case of the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust, the philosophical debate that ensued about the “nature of evil” may not have developed by chance right after this most tragic chapter in human history.

Taken together, the three decades that ran from the summer of 1914 to the summer of 1945 constitute a solid body of tragic developments – in a way, a second Thirty Years’ War, whose driving forces were however rooted in the European cultural, and mostly secular, terrain of the nineteenth century, rather than in religious clashes as was the case three centuries earlier. Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* had become the fundamental driver of the Westphalian political system gradually extending beyond the Old Continent. The position of the Nation above its constituents was central to the Idealist school of thought. Historian Roger Osborne wrote of the Master of Idealism, “[German philosopher Friedrich] Hegel’s belief [is] in historic destiny [...] and, above all, the growing attachment to the nation-state as a historical, organic, semi-mystical entity, subject to the laws of evolution, including the survival of the fittest.”⁷ Theory became practice. “There was a strange temper in the air,” wrote Winston Churchill while describing the atmosphere that led to World War One in his book, *The World Crisis*, first published in 1923. “Unsatisfied by material prosperity the nations turned fiercely towards strife, internal or external. National passions, unduly exalted in the decline of religion, burned beneath the surface of nearly every land with fierce, if shrouded, fires.”

The emphasis on collective actors was not confined to nations, however. Men were increasingly reduced to numbers assembled in armies through conscription. The detached comparative body was counting to assess victory or defeat, as well as the economy of

⁷ Roger Osborne, *Civilization. A New History of the Western World*, Pegasus Books, 2006, p408.

the war – the “maximum slaughter at minimum expense” as British philosopher Bertrand Russel put it –, is particularly telling in this respect. Something similar could be said of the workers in factories central to the Industrial Revolution. Even the united masses advocated by Marx’s *Das Kapital* that constituted a great step forward regarding the exploited and powerless proletariat – let alone the Russian serfdom – were bound to become almost as faceless. The prominence of collective actors and the certainties that the related sense of belonging were supposed to provide – such as the promised bright future of one’s own nation and the eventual triumph of the working class – outstripped the rising aspirations for individual freedoms and civil rights that the Age of Enlightenment had generated.

Heroic behavior was one way to stand out from the crowd. “[M]en were everywhere eager to dare,” Churchill wrote following the phrase cited above. Heroism along with other forms of deep or sentimental commitment descended from Romanticism, another cultural stream that was part of the legacy of the nineteenth century. Also, the myth of Progress (capital P) was typical of the era and included technological advancement and the expansion of trade thanks to the dramatically increased velocity and capacity of ground and sea transportation. Although it culminated in the World’s Fair held in Paris in 1900, the first phase of globalization took place under the aegis of the British Empire. But it was the entire European society of the time that cultivated a fallacious sense of cosmopolitanism and indulged in exotic cultural trends nourished by colonialism.

Concurrent with scientific and technical progress was the conviction that people’s longing for peace and prosperity across nations was bound to be met by a stable international order based on the balance of power and the expansion of trade among states. Symbolic of this conviction, which was more or less sincerely espoused by many heads of state, was the International Peace Conference held in The Hague in 1899 – a year before the above-mentioned *Exposition Universelle*. The Convention on Peaceful Dispute Settlement produced at the conference proved totally ineffective, if not naïve altogether, with the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. The balance of power did play a major role, but not in preventing either of the two world wars, rather in dragging them on for years despite the *blitzkrieg* rhetoric that was briefly cultivated at the start of both.

In sum, consequentiality tells us that the events of the first part of what historian Eric Hobsbawm famously called the “short century”⁸ were the product of the power architecture, cultural environment, economic development and technological innovation that had taken shape over the preceding decades. 1945 was such a dramatic hiatus as to open a new era, which in a similar way can be seen as generating the roots and causes of the unfolding of world events at the start of the current century. To substantiate this proposition let us first briefly look at the rest of Hobsbawm’s short century.

⁸ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. Pantheon Books, 1994.

Three Post-WWII Transitions

Three key and mostly parallel transitions took place over those four and half decades that ran from the fall of Berlin to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first took place beginning with the post-war reconstruction phase to include what came to be called the “post-Industrial Revolution”. Although dubbed “imperialist” by an array of detractors, the United States that came out of the Second World War on top of the global hierarchy of power did not fully embrace the traditional approach of winners. While establishing leadership (i.e. accepted hegemony) in a new military alliance, the U.S. helped a number of countries across the Atlantic Ocean, former enemies included, to rebuild in a context of market economy and – with some exceptions – democracy. Many of these countries experienced exceptionally high rates of economic growth as well as a reduction of the income inequalities that had culminated with the *Belle Époque*. The support given to the project of an integrated Europe – a potential geopolitical rival – was particularly uncharacteristic of imperial conduct. American policies to help reconstruction in the Pacific area, particularly in Japan, were not much different, with the result being the birth of a sort of extended West. At the same time, bold investment in research and development led to rapid advances in manufacturing, including automation, and to the advent of the personal computer. It was the combined effect of unprecedented growth, economic integration and technological innovation that brought about the post-Industrial Revolution. Possibly more than ever before, advanced society was synonymous with the above-mentioned “extended West.”

Geostrategically opposed to the West was the alliance dominated by the Soviet Union or, in Eurocentric terminology, the East. The second transition covered the period from the establishment of the “iron curtain” to the collapse of the Soviet system. More than one paradox marked this historical upheaval. To begin with, a new colossal buildup of opposing arsenals of unprecedented lethality did not lead to direct clashes. The novelty of their nuclear components lay in the famous MAD – Mutual Assured Destruction – capability. In 1955, then Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson poignantly summarized the situation, “the balance of terror has replaced the balance of power.”⁹ It turned out to be a momentous replacement, since the new “balance” proved effective where the old one had failed, in preventing all-out war. Another paradox was that those Western societies living in fear of total annihilation – the pending “nuclear holocaust” being a commonly used expression at the time – were more or less the same advanced societies undergoing an extraordinary phase of growth and welfare thanks to the first technological transition. In the end, the war that did not happen was peacefully eliminated from collective consciousness as an eventual consequence of citizens crossing a border conceived to impermeably divide two worlds. The demise of the Soviet Union, which Putin later termed “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century¹⁰, was far more than a military defeat – it was the failure of a system unable to remotely match the polity,

⁹ This sentence is part of a speech made in June 1955 at the 10th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter.

¹⁰ From the BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>.

economy and culture – indeed the society – of its rival.

The third parallel transition following the end of WWII consisted of a shift from decolonization to globalization. The demise of colonial empires benefited from the initial support of a sympathetic America that had been born as a nation out of a war of independence. Most of the lands involved in this transition were outside the two rival blocs and so notoriously came to be called the Third World. They predominantly extended over the Southern Hemisphere and broadly epitomized slower socioeconomic progress rate compared to advanced societies. Under the combined influence of the East-West tensions and the endogenous rivalries often descending from a colonial heritage neglectful of local roots, several wars erupted in the various continents and ended in ethnic or religious splits rather than conquest or integration. This process gave birth to a growing number of new sovereign states, often at the further expense of already troubled economies and national institutions. Authoritarian regimes took advantage of the connivance of one or the other superpower, as well as of increasingly powerful multinational corporations; yet, following the energy crisis of the 1970s and the related economic instabilities, growth rates began to rise, albeit unequally. Goods were increasingly traded, and new forms of people-to-people interchange developed. Market driven economic interdependence among nations was gaining momentum as a premise for a second, a more far-reaching phase of globalization unleashed by the end of the stymied bipolar system.

The birth and growth of an unprecedented array of international treaties, institutions and functional groups accompanied all three transitions. Some originated in the wake of the WWII disaster, like the United Nations and the so-called Bretton Woods institutions. Others were associated with the initial years of the Cold War – directly, as with the countervailing military alliances, or indirectly, as in the field of preferential economic cooperation and integration. Prominent among these were the birth and growth of the European Community in the western part of the Old Continent. Additional international bodies took shape at the regional or global level in a variety of areas such as security and arms control, economics and the environment, and – not to be forgotten – international law. Moreover, several bilateral agreements and treaties related to trade were negotiated and brought to life.

Another new feature of diplomatic relations was the growing proliferation of multilateral summits and *ad hoc* groups of states. All these developments were the product of inter-state operations. But, more so than in any other time in history, ordinary citizens became aware of, and involved in the growing interdependence developing between their respective nations and their partners in the various contexts – within the relevant power hierarchies, of course. Public opinion began to address the ensuing advantages or constraints, including institutional ones, and to express – to the extent they enjoyed the freedom of doing so – and even organize support or opposition vis-à-vis the emerging mutual dependence with the world abroad.

As highlighted above, it took some time after the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan to fully realize the size and composite nature of the massacre that had taken place over the previous years. The shock inevitably affected the cultural backdrop of the transitions just discussed. East-West confrontation was also an ideological divide between totalitarian communism and democratic liberalism. The communist ideology, including its claim of social justice and revolutionary rhetoric, did exert cultural and political appeal among significant circles in the West and the Third World. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet system gave the end of the Cold War a cultural dimension that in turn contributed to a broader decline of ideologies. Meanwhile, many religious expressions had lost ground under the combined, yet mostly contradictory pressure of ideological materialism and welfare secularism. Pragmatism appeared to be in ascent among ordinary people, but also at the governmental level as the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence against many geopolitical odds may suggest.

The big boost that science and technology had received from military applications during the war-prone first half of the twentieth century was transferred seamlessly to the second, which was marked by an even more costly and relentless arms race, as already mentioned. The dramatic developments in nuclear and rocket science and technology, both before and after 1945, witnessed a continuing interstate geopolitical rivalry. Other technological advancements, such as automation and computers, also profited from big incentives provided by states. But the symbolism of the atom and, to a lesser extent, space went beyond the

domain of science and technology and raised moral and cultural issues. The related dilemmas – the subject of a vast amount of literature – were initially a concern of the élite, but rapidly moved into public debate. The dual use of the energy released by the splitting of the atom generated two popular movements critical of the related massive programs, pacifism and environmentalism, that often but not always overlapped with each other. Both were here to stay well after the end of the Cold War, eventually touching upon other technology-related issues.

Now, all these developments along with what we have called the post-WWII transitions provided, more than is commonly perceived, a favorable context. Indeed, they played an incubatory role for the world's societies to undergo profound transformations, at least in their embryonic stages – something that is true especially but not exclusively for advanced societies. Starting with demography, the decline of fertility rates began in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s not only in North America and Europe, but also in East Asia and Latin America. In many nations, the women's movement that was related to these trends also manifested itself regarding access to education and labor markets.¹¹ Moreover, the spread of communications was accelerating to the point that Marshall McLuhan foresaw the coming of the "global village" as early as 1964. Finally, the new stages of industrialization contributed to the process of urbanization and the gradual shrinking of rural manpower, also in

¹¹ Actually women's access to jobs and political rights often came before birth control, particularly in the West, where the two World Wars provided a significant boost.

developing areas. The deterioration of the global climate that began to take place as a byproduct, was initially denied – often through the influence of those responsible for it – or overlooked, except by a minority. The first report on “The Limits to Growth,” issued by the Club of Rome back in 1972, was such as to anticipate the coming broad concern about the environment, its several inaccuracies notwithstanding.

B. A Different Global Society: Making Good of Change

The incubatory phase just discussed led to a metamorphosis of most of the world’s societies that unfolded over the subsequent two decades or so – the promising, yet ambiguous period in history characterized as the post-Cold War era. In a relative flash, world citizens have been aging, feminizing and urbanizing to an unprecedented degree, even after the many variances from place to place are duly taken into account. Moreover, thanks to rapidly evolving technologies they have been communicating, working, learning, and making themselves heard in new ways and across continents in an increasingly interdependent planet.

As stressed above, society had already undergone major transformations in the past, but its basic constituent, the individual, was undermined to a significant extent by the dominance of collective subjects such as nations, armies, churches and masses. More recently, skyrocketing information-sharing and communications, as well as a pervasive digital revolution, have generated unprecedented citizen empowerment and civil society growth, putting pressure on their

relationship with public authorities to degrees that also vary depending on the nature of the latter. World economic interdependence flourished over the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century but proved to be utterly fragile under the impact of great power rivalries. During the transition to the present century, global growth has instead witnessed an impressive synergy between developed and developing economies even across deep geopolitical and ideological divides, while a number of private and civilian transnational operators have risen to the forefront of world affairs.

Our first proposition here is that the changing societal fabric is no less important than the new geopolitical, strategic and economic context. Policymaking by all actors involved cannot afford to ignore its consequences while dealing with foreign, as well as domestic affairs. Indeed, the shared challenge for many states, whatever their size and regimen, is to handle the advent of this twenty-first century society, which is a cultural challenge as much as a political, economic and social one. The new power hierarchies will increasingly be affected also by their ability to face this challenge.

For those who were already wielding power, a societal metamorphosis of this scale is interpreted predominantly as a source of concern. Perceived risks include the economic un-sustainability of demographic change, overwhelming instant information and weakening state authority. The current high fragmentation of international as well as internal security, both occasionally punctuated by episodes of barbaric violence, is also frequently ascribed to societal instability. Expressions such as

“systemic disorder,” “the world adrift” and “the great unraveling” have become increasingly popular among political analysts and commentators to convey alarm and uncertainty. It is suggested here, as a second proposition, that societal transformations are not only important but can open the door for opportunity as much as they can produce risk, provided that their manifestations are properly understood and their developments steered in the desirable direction.

For this to happen, policy options should be framed inside long-term strategies that are consistent with societal trends, beginning with those advanced nations and civilizations whose societies have been allowed to digest change with fewer traumas. The purpose would be to help move from globally-shared transformations to convergent or, at least, compatible policies and norms. To this end, our third proposition is that a number of policy-making paradigms may have to be revised accordingly, including those related to international relations and institutions. In a context of resilient economic interdependence in which private subjects such as multinational corporations and civil society organizations play more prominent roles, the question of whether national governments are as decisive on the world stage as they used to be, deserves to be addressed. Before discussing this, however, let’s go briefly through the societal transformations that were touched upon above.

Demography, Gender, Education

Fertility rates are the first case in point. They have continued declining on a global scale for more than half a century. Although the

rates originate at different starting points, they appear to be broadly converging in the long term towards the so-called “replacement level.” In the short term, however, the global average will remain above such a level, thus, the world population is bound to grow for at least four or five more decades. Moreover, the average hides marked differences among nations and ethnic groups. Many of the tensions and conflicts that have been raging over more than a decade are linked to ethnic differences and demographic imbalances. In the interest of promoting confidence and global security, the shared objective should be to help curb population growth where it remains excessively high while encouraging fecundity where birth rates are significantly below replacement levels. While the latter task falls within the domestic policy sphere, the former has been acted upon also, if not mainly, by international and non-governmental organizations. Their action, however, has systematically met resistance mostly for faith-based or ethnic motivations.

Another major demographic trend to reckon with is increasing life expectancy and the consequent aging of the world population. Again, behind global averages, there are significant differences from nation to nation. The priority of those countries still struggling with bulging youth populations is to find appropriate economic and social solutions as soon as possible, even though an aging population will eventually become a common feature for them as well. Those states that are already seriously confronted with the aging of their citizens should lead the way in devising and introducing provisions so as to remain viable and serve as

models for the others that can learn from their past mistakes. They should include the extension of formative and working age spans in proportion to longer life expectancies at all income levels— of course, to the extent compatible with the different types of work.

Urbanization is yet another demographic challenge, which all regions are facing, but particularly the developing ones. The ensuing emergence of a new class of consumers and the related need for new construction and infrastructure in the “urban world” constitute tough problems to tackle. New communication, computation and environmental-friendly technologies are expected to facilitate solutions, with the new approach that goes under the label of “smart city” likely to be critical for large urban agglomerates in avoiding social and structural disorder. At the same time, increasing transnational cooperation and shared experiences among megacities is already making them economic subjects and global actors of growing importance.

Migratory flows due to demographic and/or economic pressures, as well as wars and/or civil conflicts are certainly not a new phenomenon in the history of humankind. But today’s enhanced facility of human mobility and easy access to telecommunications and social media, including those linking people to their communities of origin, have produced new forms of social, ethnic and religious-cultural intermixing in the receiving societies. Acute problems have arisen from such intermixing, and they are the origin of political dislocation at best or ruthless interethnic strife at worse. Local solutions desperately need to be compounded and

strengthened by collective action to reduce the human tragedy of migrants – the “orphans of globalization” according to a poignant definition.¹²

Women’s education is the point of convergence between two developments that are important spin-offs of societal change: emancipation from discrimination and the overall spread of education. Both provide favorable conditions for the realization of the opportunities suggested in our second proposition. Declining human fertility is indicative of women increasingly taking control over reproduction. However, in some societies, the movement to further increase women’s freedom of choice and gender parity faces obstacles connected to traditions and culture. Even female genital mutilation remains a largely hidden practice that still needs to be eradicated in many regions, especially in Africa and the Middle East. Women’s liberation may end up being the defining issue for those countries and civilizations that uncomfortable with the transformation of society. Muslim nations are affected to the highest degree, including important states that have close ties to the West, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. Indicative in this respect is the case of Iran, which is possibly the most theocratic state of the Levant as well as the country with the most culturally and socially dynamic female population.

But even where women’s rights have achieved notable progress in the past, risks of regression exist, as recent developments in

¹² Ian Goldin, *Divided Nations. Why Global Governance is Falling, and What We Can Do about it.* Oxford University Press, 2014, p39.

China and India seem to suggest. Moreover, a gender gap in economic participation that is higher in South Korea than in China and the Philippines shows that discrimination problems persist in advanced societies. Even today issues of full parity before the law, equal pay and protection against violence frequently emerge in Europe and the American subcontinents as well. In sum, women's struggle for emancipation is far from over, yet at the same time, gender solidarity seems to be on the rise both within and across civilizations and can prove to be a powerful source of change. The case of Pakistani student Malala Yousafzai – the youngest Nobel laureate in history – shows that the challenge is to substantiate broad, contingent and soft official consensus with determination, continuity and effective action. As with other human rights violations, a major obstacle still to be overcome is the taboo of non-external interference in domestic affairs inherent to the Westphalian state system.

The massive advent of new technologies had an impact on virtually all the developments deemed as desirable above. Family planning, access to education and the development of jobs suitable for the elderly have been made easier by scientific and technological advancement in various fields, including chemistry, biology, telecommunications and now digitalization. All actors involved, public and private alike, should enhance the availability of, and the accessibility to, these related products. In particular, promoting education via the Internet in disadvantaged areas and social strata should be a priority for governments, international organizations and the private sector. Elementary schools and other low or

intermediate echelons of training should be the main beneficiaries, as online university courses tend to proliferate at the global level out of their initiative.

The Internet Revolution and Big Data

The rapid and worldwide growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been a dominant factor in enhancing the role of the individual. Lightning-speed connectivity has joined satellite television to enrich the empowerment of citizens with the added value of a transnational dimension. Now people enjoy new opportunities of community building of various kinds, including civil society organizations. The wave of protests that has taken place in many regions of the world is also the result of new facilities for mobilization. This development has been resilient even where individual freedoms are inhibited. ICT gadgets, however, can lead to egocentrism and particularism as well. Social and political fragmentations are frequent problematic byproducts, as is the obsession with personal identity. The growth of civil society has in turn the potential of empowering citizens in a context of social solidarity aptly combined with free competition, but can also lead to movements and NGOs that sponsor positions adverse to civil advancement.¹³ The

¹³ Thomas Carothers, in a study of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says that: "The spike of global protests [favored by new ICTs, the growth of civil societies and other factors] is becoming a major trend in international politics, but care is needed in ascertaining the precise nature and impact of the phenomenon." See: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/08/complex-ties-of-global-protests>

challenge is to identify the related options, pursue policies and introduce norms that are such as to help the desirable alternatives to prevail.

In addition to serving educational and civilian purposes, and providing the main vehicle of communication and information, the cybersphere has also been expanding exponentially to host an ever wider array of economic activities in the areas of e-commerce, advertising and financial markets. Interpersonal relations are being further enhanced, including across national boundaries – even language boundaries with the recent introduction of online translators. In the process, huge quantities of data and metadata (i.e. data about data) on customers, travelers, and phone or social media users are easily and cheaply collected, ostensibly to better serve them. The private sector has been the main engine driving this new industrial revolution possibly more than with any previous one. Thus, the task of public authorities is less one of promotion than of handling the consequences. At first glance, the main policy dilemmas appear to be caught between the opportunities offered by easy access to ever lower cost services on one hand, and the risks of having one's freedom of choice constrained, or distorted, and personal privacy lost on the other. As the ensuing choices inevitably intermingle with those related to free access to new and traditional media, responses vary depending on the nature of the authority of the concerned country. In fact, the dark side of the Internet revolution includes ICTs being exploited by autocratic regimes to shield themselves from scrutiny and to manipulate domestic public opinion.

Moreover, a sizable portion of the expanding Internet space is being taken over by cyber war and espionage, with related strategic implications. This is obviously a matter for national governments. Business activities in the digital and telecommunication areas – which happen to include today's new industrial giants – are either under pressure to covertly supply data and information to state intelligence or fall under state control altogether. Therefore, the citizen's dilemmas discussed above are further compounded by the imperatives of national security, including in democratic states. In sum, the interplay between individual and collective subjects, public and private actors, and domestic and international dimensions in today's hyper-connected world has reached an unprecedented complexity and points to the need for substantive innovation in policy making, foreign policy included, as suggested in the third proposition put forth here. The dialectics have been intense – and occasionally tense – within the West. But the pursuit of the necessary new rules of the game is bound to extend to the global sphere and thus raise the issue of how the power game is evolving in the international context.

The Role of States and the Advent of Geoeconomics

The complex mix of political actors concerned with cyberspace, and the emerging policy alternatives in relation to it, help us to understand why the Internet has become a major factor in the overarching process by which changing societies de facto alter the polity of nations and the state-based international system. Societal

transformation does not bring democracy per se. But it has been concurrent with the increasing number of democratic states around the world since the end of the Cold War – up until recently, at least.¹⁴ Authoritarian regimes, compared to nations endowed with liberty, have found it harder to live with their citizens becoming empowered and a civil society that is expanding. Thus accompanying societies through change and increasing interaction has the potential of promoting the rule of law and the protection of human rights in order to grow in ways that are compatible with the world's varying cultural and social backgrounds. That may include countries in which the election of leaders through popular vote is either absent or fraudulent.

Societal transformation does not bring peace per se either. But it has run parallel to the decline of inter-state war and the underlying trend of fewer war-related casualties that has been detectable over the last three to four decades, although with wild oscillations due to bloody local conflicts.¹⁵ All this could change direction, as we are reminded by both the rise of what has been called “hybrid warfare” or “fragmented warfare” – i.e. political, religious and interethnic violence – and, at the same time the growing global military expenditure that keeps the big clash scenario open; yet, “all-out war” rhetoric has lost popularity, except among fanatics, while international consensus against the “carpet bombing” of cities, genocide and the use of

¹⁴ According to The Polity Project of NSD, the number of democracies in the world has grown, although with some oscillations, since the end of WWII. A marked increase took place during the 1990s and early 2000s.

¹⁵ See: Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature. Why violence has declined*, Viking, 2011

weapons of mass destruction has, if anything, increased. And the slowly but incessantly growing support for the ban of torture and capital punishment across different cultures suggests a decline in institutional violence along with traditional warfare.¹⁶ Moreover, empowered women and aging populations may show a higher propensity for understanding, conciliation and compromise so as to offset our ancestral inclination – mostly male and youngish – towards fighting and violence. Finally, if expanding info-communications do exalt identity-, faith- and ethnicity-related sensitivities, they may also contribute to building a global public opinion that is more perceptive of common interests, including peaceful coexistence among nations.

As Joseph Nye notes in his most recent book, “What [the population having access to the power that comes from information] means is that world politics will not be the sole province of governments.”¹⁷ In fact, states may remain the basic constituent of world architecture, but more conscious citizenries, proliferating political actors – economic and civilian, national and international – and the rise of global challenges have made them increasingly inadequate, even though to variable degrees depending on their size, efficiency and legitimacy. Hence, the assessment of the “decline of states” that

¹⁶ Also this point is based on the evidence of broadly declining human violence provided by Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*. Op. cit.

¹⁷ Joseph S. Nye, jr, *Is the American Century Over?*, Polity, 2015

several pundits advanced at the turn of the century.¹⁸

To counter the underlying trend, governments and politicians – including, but not limited to autocrats and populist leaders – have clung to traditional national sovereignty as the assumed antidote to the State’s diminishing role. Multilateral institutions and functional groups aimed at enhancing cooperation by pooling sovereignty have been weakened as a consequence. Hence the emerging opposite assessment, the “return of states” outlook, that is dear to the advocates of *Realpolitik*¹⁹; yet their manifest inability to perform as exclusive centers of power as in the Westphalian order, which the return to geopolitics is supposed to vindicate, has brought with it the proliferation of fictitious sovereignties and the above-mentioned outlook of systemic disorder.

Interstate war was the concern to the master-strategist of the Westphalian order, Carl von Clausewitz, when he famously argued that “war is a continuation of political intercourse, a carrying out of the same by other means.” Inter-state war has become rare, as already noted, while the ambiguous nature of the belligerent and the less defining outcomes of violent action are such as to put the extension of Clausewitz’s theory to the current fragmented warfare at test. New “other means” have increasingly acquired the potential of complementing traditional war, if not replacing it altogether, in “carrying

out” much of the international “political intercourse.” Global economic interdependence and electronic connectivity constitute two major domains for these new means to operate. And they happen to be closer to the interests of ordinary citizens and urban communities below the state level and, at the same time, generate transnational, regional and global “intercourse” above the state level.

Thus, it has been suggested that “geoeconomics” is increasingly supplementing geopolitics as the analytical framework of world power relations.²⁰ The role of ordinary people, private interests and non-state actors is more active with the former than with the latter, and that appears to fall in line with the consequences of the societal change discussed above. Another feature of this shift is that the geopolitical game is commonly viewed as zero-sum while international economic interaction has more chances of leading to positive-sum results. China has benefited from Western-influenced interdependence and rules while trying to counterbalance some of the U.S.’ strategic presence in East Asia and on the world stage at large. Broadly speaking, global synergic growth has occurred thanks to the free movement of goods and investment capitals in a cooperative and structured context that has coexisted with, and often prevailed over, geopolitical differences.

Economic interdependence can be a catalyst in spreading instability as well, as happened recently in the capital markets. Moreover, cooperation is not the only name of the geoeconomic game. Coercion can

¹⁸ For a historical survey see Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹⁹ See f.i. Walter R. Mead, *The return of Geopolitics. The Revenge of Revisionist Powers*, Foreign Affairs 93/3, May/June 2014.

²⁰ Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, *Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, a forthcoming book.

be exerted by making use of a panoply of economic instruments with purposes that may transcend the economic sphere and attend to, and possibly reduce, strategic tensions without resorting to “hard” instruments. In two major cases, economic sanctions have been imposed on Iran to contain its nuclear program and more recently on Russia to countervail its interference in Ukraine. Estimates of the ensuing costs for the “inflicting”, as well as the “targeted” countries, are part of the continuing debate about the effectiveness of sanctions and involve the affected private stakeholders (industries, banks and personal fortunes) on both sides. Whatever the assessment, economic warfare is not exempt from negative consequences. Moreover, resorting to sanctions is a bet on the very fabric of interdependence as a shared value for all contenders – a value at risk of devaluation in the case of abuse; yet options must be weighed against alternatives, which are likely to be of military nature thus having costs in blood and treasure that are usually much higher and have longer lasting consequences than those linked to economic coercion. On balance, the rising paradigm of geoeconomics, with all its limits and drawbacks, is more likely to lead to positive-sum results and seems to better respond to the evolving interaction between world societies than does inter-state geopolitics.

Growing connectivity, from information-sharing to social networking, within and among world populations enhances the perception that common interests descend from economic interdependence, including the need to fight the ills that come with it. Citizenries, for example, have become alert

to the plague of corruption, tax evasion and financial crime (which often flourish in ambiguous relationships with political leaderships) and are increasingly aware of the transnational scale of the problem. Governments – whether democratic or autocratic, and presiding over advanced or emerging economies – find it more and more difficult to ignore the related popular discontent and hide the fact that duly equipped international cooperation is required. Bilateral or multilateral agreements are being reached with the objective of closing tax havens, curbing bribery and sharing bank account information. The dogma of national sovereignty and non-interference has had to adapt to the imperative of cross-border surveillance on fleeing capital and illegal transfers, in order to ensure the payment of fiscal dues to the proper authorities.

It is true that today’s communication and social media tools also constitute the playing field for big-data espionage and cyber war, as discussed above. This is where states are definitely in charge in what one may call “online geopolitics”. But again, the huge expansion of trans-border e-commerce, advertising and financial transactions via the Internet is such as to generate a parallel and often alternative domain of international dealings based on economic synergy and cooperation as much as on competition and rivalry. Here the dominant presence of private operators and the potential for positive-sum outcomes that are characteristic of geoeconomics extend to the online dimension. Thus, connectivity reinforces global economic interdependence, provides additional credentials for geoeconomics and

contributes to the consistency of both with societal change.

Facing Retrogression in the International System

The trend by which governments share, or contend for, the role of the protagonist on the world stage with new private actors has come under further scrutiny as a consequence of the dramatic events that have taken place over the last decade, as briefly mentioned in the introduction. The transition is part of a broader and diverse set of developments that seems to be adversely affecting the international outlook in several hot spots on the global map and possibly reversing, at least some of the trends that had become manifest during the previous phase. Since our analysis identifies a close link between such trends and the transformations under way in many societies, questions therefore arise with regard to the fate of the latter.

Let us start with the once promising “Arab Spring” that has given way to an inextricable and backward mix of religious, ethnic and tribal conflicts as well as collapsing states. As the societal change in the affected countries was a major factor in triggering the uprisings, now secular education and women’s emancipation are the main targets, often shared by the otherwise divided factions active in the strife. The Middle East and large parts of Africa have been devastated by primitive violence including public stonings, prisoner beheadings and the large-scale rape of women, occasionally made known worldwide through sophisticated new media. Further adverse impacts on society have come from the takeover of schools by clerics

and Islamist leaders and the widespread distortion of Internet-based civic interaction by resurgent tribal, clannish or sectarian affiliations, along with returning military nationalism, as is the case in Egypt.

This fragmented warfare has further blurred the distinction between civilians and the military, with a gray area in between comprised of fighters and suicide bombers, including women and children. Due to this kind of warfare and the failure or breakup of states, the devastation of cities and the displacement of civilians in the order of sixty million people have generated large and growing masses of stateless populations in Africa and the Middle East. A self-proclaimed “state” – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or the Levant) – has been waging war and terrorism at sub- and trans-national levels. All these adverse developments have led to a dramatic loss of faith in democracy particularly where elections had taken place to no avail. Such vast, and what will likely be long-term, instability is projected outward both by implicating neighboring states or distant powers and by generating massive outflows of desperate migrants, including war refugees, who end up fomenting reactionary, xenophobic and counter-faith attitudes in their receiving societies. Increasingly, both inside the affected countries and outside, the survival or the restoration of the State appears to depend largely on resorting to authoritarian solutions.

Thus, fanatics have been rivaled by strongmen in taking center stage. As Freedom House reports, in the year 2014, “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a rollback of democratic gains by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Turkish President

Erdogan's intensified campaign against press freedom and civil society, and further centralization of authority in China were evidence of a growing disdain for democratic standards that was found in nearly all regions of the world."²¹ Autocracies are back on the rise at the expense of democracies, according to the same source.²² By definition, they tend to roll back the empowerment of citizens, muzzle civil society organizations and control new, as well as traditional, media. As for gender, action to reverse the trend of women's emancipation has intensified in most of the above-mentioned cases (while, by the way, there have been few, if any, female autocrats in power).

Strongmen are more at ease with the traditional sovereign state power game than with pervasive interdependence. The Ukrainian crisis has come to epitomize the inescapable logic of geopolitics. President Putin, frequently dubbed the "new czar", swiftly took hold of a piece of land that the Russian Empire lost in the mid-nineteenth century to the allied forces of France, Great Britain and the small Kingdom of Sardinia after a four-year war. The land grab in Crimea in 2014 was the first territorial annexation in Europe since 1945. But

²¹ See *Freedom in the World 2015*, the 2015 Freedom House's Annual Report.

²² "More aggressive tactics by authoritarian regimes and an upsurge in terrorist attacks contributed to a disturbing decline in global freedom in 2014. *Freedom in the World 2015* found an overall drop in freedom for the ninth consecutive year. Nearly twice as many countries suffered declines as registered gains—61 to 33—and the number of countries with improvements hit its lowest point since the nine-year erosion began." (*ibid*)

geopolitical rivalries and related border issues have also become tenser in the East and South Asian theaters, where a potential for confrontation between major powers exists while the Gulf appears likely to follow the trend. Moreover, instability and regressing international consensus remind us, should we have forgotten, of the existence of nuclear arsenals ready to go on alert.

In Africa and the Middle East, several political maps are at stake, as those state borders that were once penciled in by colonizers now risk being erased by tribal, ethnic and religious factors. New, more stable boundaries will be hard to draw. In the whole area, the current absence of inter-state war appears ever more fragile in a context of spreading fragmented warfare and fanatic calls to arms. Broadly speaking, the very attempt to recognize the long-term decline of warfare and violence at large, as suggested above, is being met with criticism.²³

The return to past eras of strategic confrontation has become more and more fashionable with commentators. Our long and troubled history has plenty on offer. Recurring references include the twentieth century Cold War with its related risk of atomic annihilation of humankind; or the nineteenth century European "balance of power" that led to the tragedy of two World Wars (as discussed above); or the seventeenth century Thirty Years' War that, under the guise of a religious strife, brought about a bloody reshaping of the Old Continent; or even the seventh century

²³ See f. i. John Gray, *Steven Pinker is wrong about violence and war*, *The Guardian*, 15 March, 2015.

Caliphate and subsequent attempts to revive it. Whatever the chosen historic precedent, all options spell trouble for the continuity of the trends that could be detected around the turn of the present century. And, as a consequence of the subsequent instability, the planet appears to be in for an even more uncertain future.

Historical repetitions and related policy implications, however, should be taken with caution. Putin's revisionism of the European order is again a prominent case in point. Retribution for the seizure of Crimea and continuing pressure on Kiev has been confined almost entirely to economic sanctions by the U.S. and the other parties in the militarily superior Atlantic Alliance, which borders on Ukraine. The Russian economy has been seriously affected. A similar approach had already been taken and had been upheld for several years in order to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons up until the recent agreement, which can be considered a success for the use of economic and financial leverage over military action. Such a substitution has not gone without discussions and recriminations within the West – besides being loathed by the Israeli government. But the question here is how such new forms of power relations, which may be more consistent with geoeconomics than with strategic confrontation, are viewed by other major global players. Economic sanctions as applied by the West have been criticized by the targeted states on the ground that they constitute a hostile action, inflict misery on populations and disrupt interdependence. Global economic interdependence, however, has proven relatively less affected by geopolitical crises than had been the

case in the past. One example of this phenomenon was provided by the movement of oil and gas prices that once went up in times of conflicts in the producing areas and have instead significantly gone down recently. Energy market considerations appear to have been predominant over the traditional geopolitical ones. Broadly speaking, instabilities in the financial and commodity markets appear to have been dictated less by strategic confrontations than by economic developments and prospects. Should this state of affairs remain sufficiently unaffected over the coming years, the above-mentioned suggestion of a geoeconomic rational complementing geopolitics may deserve continuing attention, despite a regressive change in the international system.

Above all, today's societies are different and follow different dynamics from those of all past critical transitions in history that are referred to as paradigms to assess the present unruly global situation and to advance adequate policy options. Over the last decade, technological innovation has, if anything, further accelerated on a global scale, while the main features of demographic change – declining fertility, aging and urbanization – appear to have been sparsely affected by recent adverse developments. Thus, at least part of the pressure for societies to evolve remains high despite the many setbacks civil advancement has been suffering from growing authoritarianism or spreading political and social chaos in a number of unstable regions. The return of authoritarian states is regrettable but is unlikely to translate into that of the totalitarian regimes that were related to the total subordination of private

individuals to all-pervasive public control. What is possibly the world's only totalitarian state, North Korea, is not a product of recent regression in world affairs, rather it is a remnant of the Cold War that has been able to survive by consistently isolating its subjects and preventing them access to modern communication and information technologies.

In the end, societal transformation may prove resilient enough to survive the political deterioration in these regions while continuing almost unaffected in others. In line with our propositions above, the message here is that policies apt at counteracting the revisionism of the international order, as advocated by both fanatics and strongmen, may have more chances to succeed if they are consistent with societal change. That applies in particular to those policies Western countries would be advised to follow, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

C. New Foreign Policy Opportunities Open for Europe and the United States

The West was central to the events that shook the world throughout the previous century, as briefly discussed in the first section of this paper. And it was within the West itself that the most significant geopolitical change took place between the nineteenth and the twentieth century: i.e. the shift of the dominant global role from Europe to America.

Tragic events cast a long and dark shadow over that century that history has been at pain to fully digest. What we have called the "New Thirty Years' War" witnessed the largest massacres of human beings in history. At the

time it was the prerogative of civilized leaders and recognized heads of state to coolly plan and order mass killings of enemies in the order of tens to hundreds of thousands, including civilian women, elders and children, as well as the large-scale razing of cities richly endowed with historical buildings and artistic treasures (something not to be forgotten while we stand horrified today at the barbaric killings of dozens or even hundreds of people at a time and the destruction of splendid archeological sites in the Middle East). Moreover, huge scientific, industrial and military efforts were deployed to develop, test and disseminate arms capable of decimating the human species and devastating its habitat.

Despite this dark shadow, there were also remarkable rays of light that remain part of the rich and multiform heritage the twentieth century has left behind. Powerful dictators were defeated, and most totalitarian ideologies deceased, allowing for the prospect of democracy to consolidate and to spread in different continents. Moreover, not only did most of the states that were there some one hundred years ago survive the two World Wars but an unprecedented number of new ones were born in the following decades and received international recognition, largely as a consequence of decolonization.

The ascent to primacy by the United States, consequent to the shift above, went beyond strategic prevalence and economic dynamism and took the form of institution building both at a global level and in what we have called the "extended West". Under American influence, a dramatic economic development unfolded and increasingly

extended to other nations with the consequence of making the world interdependent to an unprecedented degree. At the same time, confrontation with the antagonist block was successfully overcome thanks to factors including the composite nature of U.S. power as well as that of its allies and partners. It was in the context of the resulting liberal international system that a new process of globalization took form.

Regarding the Old Continent, the difference between the two halves of the past century is particularly marked as they correspond to its dramatic fall and subsequent relative new rise. Under the low-cost security shield provided by the Atlantic Alliance, irreversible peace among the European states and shared economic growth were achieved beginning in the 1950s with the yielding of parts of national sovereignty to common institutions. Such a process of integration was extended from the original six founding countries to include a growing number of member states and acted as a magnet towards countries that had been neutral or even part of the opposite block in the East-West confrontational divide.

It was approximately at the end of the so-called “American century” that Western primacy reached its apex. This was epitomized by the U.S.’s status as the number one global military and economic power and by the European achievement of a common currency and the Union’s most ambitious enlargement. In addition, there was a rather widespread assumption that the international liberal order was here to stay, and democracy was bound to spread to other continents – a presumption famously

put in a nutshell by Francis Fukuyama’s formula of the “end of history”.

It was paradoxically at that very moment that the talk began about a decline of the United States – and the West at large – as mentioned in the introductory remarks. Initially, the perception was mostly due to the rapid economic growth of those nations that had emerged thanks to globalization and the eventual move to the top by China, which was slated to take place over the next decade or two. A succession of developments subsequently reinforced the “declinist” assessment. First, a dramatic financial crisis blew up from Wall Street in the late 2000s with an ensuing major global economic recession whose consequences and end are still questioned. Then came what we have called the “regressive phase” of world affairs, including the dramatic instability raging from North Africa to West Asia and the worsening of relations with Russia. New emphasis has been placed on the diminished control of international security by the United States and the drift towards the decay of the institutional architecture inspired by Washington. Europe, for its part, was seriously affected by the economic downturn while the events in its unstable neighborhood have been such as to make the strategic inadequacy of the EU even plainer.

Given the focus of the present study on the international relevance of societal change, the question then arises: Are Western societies being affected by the current turmoil in world affairs that seems to be reinforcing the perception of a relative decline of the West?

Western Leadership in Societal Change

Societies in advanced nations were allowed to undergo the transformations discussed in Section B of this paper through a gradual process of transition and adaptation in combination with evolving institutions. This “time factor” contributed to making them stronger than those in emerging, let alone poor, countries as shown by their consistent high ranking in the global indexes of human and social development.²⁴ The word “model” may sound patronizing, but the fact is that world societies belonging to different civilizations have predominantly tended to undergo transformations that advanced nations, those of the West in particular, had anticipated. Within the West there are differences, of course, including those between the two sides of the Atlantic, but they tend to pale when the comparison is extended to other mega-regions of the world. This fact has facilitated the West’s de facto assumption of a societal leading role that has existed at least until the current troubled era. Instability has been partly due to the fact that the transformations being experienced by other societies in shorter, occasionally much shorter, time spans were more likely to be traumatic.

²⁴One authoritative example is the Human Development Index (HDI). First developed by Pakistani economist Mahbubul Haq and inspired by Amartya Sen’s “capabilities approach,” the HDI was launched in 1990 by the United Nations Development Program. HDI is calculated on the basis of four components: 1) living standards, in terms of GDP per-capita (33% weight); 2) health, or life expectancy at birth (33%); 3) education, i.e. expected and mean years of schooling (22%); and 4) a gender-related index (11%). See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>

Despite the many criticisms being voiced on both sides of the Atlantic, the West’s relative societal strength has been manifest, for instance in the field of education. Mostly secular teaching and training systems have increasingly attracted students from other civilizations, especially at the university level. Moreover, while women’s parity remains incomplete, other gender issues, such as the recognition of gay rights, and now the right to die the way one chooses have become prominent in the public debate in Europe and America more than anywhere else. Finally, longer life expectancies remain a positive development, notwithstanding their problematic consequences, especially in social and economic terms, which advanced nations are trying to address by reforming state welfare provisions and structures.

Turning now to new communication technologies, a pioneering role was taken on by Americans in their conception, birth and growth, with the ensuing dominance of a number of corporate giants and the private imprint in the set-up of the global web infrastructure – both products of Silicon Valley, California. Although other regions are catching up at fast paces, connectivity is generally higher within and between Western nations and new information facilities have been also expanding thanks to the favorable context of freer access. The technological revolution is not exempt from negative consequences either. The development of robotics and new automation, for instance, has the potential to take jobs from the middle or lower middle classes in particular.

Then comes a rich, diverse and mostly positive civil society that has been expanding

between citizenries and national or international institutions in all democratic countries, particularly in Europe and in the United States. As discussed in the previous section, the Internet has contributed to the development of civil society organizations also in those nations where their activities have been and are being curbed, inhibited or distorted by public authorities. At the same time the problem of certain Western civil society organizations having an adverse impact on political, cultural and social advancement, as was mentioned before as well, should not be ignored.

This is the context in which we must address the above question. At the start of the present century, we are wondering whether the assumed decline of the U.S. and the European states have affected the relative vitality of Western societies and thus the influence they may have so far exerted vis-à-vis those of other nations. The issue is linked, to an extent, to the state of health of the respective political and socio-economic systems, currently the object of extensive literature mostly by alarmed analysts on both sides of the Atlantic. Its major themes may deserve a brief mention.

In America the increasingly noticeable distortion of the democratic process due to the excessive influence of powerful interest groups and a number of misgivings as to the effectiveness and distribution of the executive, legislative and judicial powers are among major reasons of concern in the political debate.²⁵ No less difficult are the

²⁵See f.i.: Francis Fukuyama, *America in Decay. The Sources of Political Disfunction*, *Foreign Affairs* 93/5, Sept-Oct 2014.

problems arising in the socioeconomic realm under the impact of the neo-liberalist historical phase. The decline of the middle class as a consequence of growing wealth and income inequalities, appear to be such as to also undermine fair access to education and broadly the proud tradition of equal opportunities that is central to the American dream.

As for Europe, the issue of integration at risk appears to be the most critical challenge, as anticipated in the introduction. Integration is at stake in four major respects: the working of common institutions in the EU's new intergovernmental rather than federal machinery; the possible breakaway of a member country from the Union; the integrity of some states under the threat of separatism; and, last but certainly not least, the absorption of a dramatically growing immigrant population, including large numbers of political refugees. Rising nationalism, particularism, populism, and xenophobia – all connected in various ways with these problem areas – are turning into challenges for democracy and the smooth functioning of the public institutions themselves. Moreover, in Europe a traditional source of pride is at stake as the sustainability of the welfare state is struggling with changing demography and a long phase of economic recession in a competitive global environment.

If not dealt with boldly and effectively, these challenging political, social and institutional problems that have been emerging on both sides of the Atlantic could affect our societies and possibly enhance the negative sides of their continuing transformations. Some of the above-mentioned factors of the West's

relative societal strength – quality of education, progress in women's rights and active civil society – may be affected more than others, although they do not seem to be subject to being irreversibly undermined or discontinued. The extraordinary dynamics of the technology sector, led by the United States, has been even more resilient. What remains to be seen is whether these Western societal trends, which, thus far, appear to have been less affected by the decline scenario, may now be possibly subjected to a more significant adverse impact as a consequence of the current regressive international phase.

The Consequences of International Disorder

Revisionist leaders – i.e. those who have been explicitly or implicitly challenging the international liberal order over the last decade or so, as discussed at the end of the previous section – may take advantage of the loss of appeal of the Western political systems consequent to their current shortcomings in terms of sound democracy, fair economic distribution, reliable welfare state services and continuing integration. Revealing in this respect may be the financial support Vladimir Putin has apparently provided to political parties such as the National Front in France and the Northern League in Italy.

Alternative models are advocated that reward meritocracy, as in China, Singapore, and other Asian countries, or religious inspiration and dogma, as in the broader Middle East, or nationalistic pride as for instance in Russia (but also Egypt), over democracy, secularism and liberty. Although these different models may be rooted in

local cultural backgrounds, they are de facto used in most cases to justify authoritarianism, constraints on personal freedoms and manipulation of social behaviors. Attempts at discontinuing or altering the transformations of society that are central to this analysis are frequent, including inhibiting access to objective information and transnational personal communications, as well as women's rights and emerging civil society. Local non-governmental organizations, especially those having international connections, namely with the West, are preferential targets – something that may have been made easier by the occasionally patronizing attitudes of some, mostly American civil society organizations.

The worsening of the world outlook and the increasing problems confronting the international liberal order have provided new arguments to the Western advocates of a return to traditional power relations. Calls on the United States to rely more openly on its strategic superiority vis-à-vis rival powers such as Russia, China and a number of difficult interlocutors in the Middle East have been recurrent in America – and not only in America. In Europe partial re-nationalization has been taking place in the EU decision-making process, facilitating the return of Germany to a central role in the continent – a major geopolitical shift over the last decade or two that seems to be reverting matters back the nineteenth century.

As for the U.S., let us consider the view of one of the most consistent and authoritative masters of geopolitics. In his latest book, "World Order," Henry Kissinger moves from his templates of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) with the related rule of non-interference, and

the Congress of Vienna (1815) with the related rule of balance of power, to revisit their positive impact on the inter-state relations of the time and consider their possible, indeed desirable, application to the present situation.²⁶ China is the unavoidable and not necessarily unresponsive partner in the game according to the former U.S. Secretary of State's rich and articulate analysis. However one may point out what appears as an inadequate consideration of current world features like unprecedented economic interdependence, the growing impact of technology on human and political relations, and the transformation of society. Societal change has been infinitely more far-reaching over the last hundred years than during the previous two and half centuries stretching from the Peace of Westphalia to the gunshot of Sarajevo. Kissinger's concern about "societies driven by mass consensus", constituting an "internal danger" for the international order²⁷, reflects the perception of change, which however tends to be seen as an intractable problem rather than the new context for a solution.

It is suggested here that one major difference between the post-Vienna and post-Cold War worlds may be the very distinction between domestic and foreign affairs, which has become increasingly blurred. Today the "classic image of a Leviathan state is outdated" as one commentator recently pointed out.²⁸ The change is not irrelevant to the growing interaction between international affairs and societal transformation. People-to-people connectivity,

²⁶H. Kissinger, *World Order*, Op Cit.

²⁷H. Kissinger, *World Order*, Op Cit, p359.

²⁸Chester Crocker, *The Strategic Dilemma of a World Adrift*, Survival 57/1, February-March 2015.

borderless trade and finance, transnational religious influence and fragmented warfare, including terrorism, tend to escape the neat inter-state power play, as we discussed earlier in reference to von Clausewitz's theory. The current "systemic disorder" may sound worse than the nineteenth century's "concert of powers," but both history and the new global reality speak caution against counting much on the latter to solve the former. Rather, both in Europe and in the United States, efforts may have to be properly deployed first of all to restore soundness and attractiveness to our political, social and institutional systems. Then the apparent resilience of Western societies appears to remain an asset of value to rely on to deal with today's critical foreign challenges.

The traditional power game among sovereign states is not all passé, of course. However, the profound transformations the world has been undergoing with an accelerating pace thanks to global markets and new technologies, suggest that geopolitics is being compounded by geoeconomics, with its related dealings, tensions and conflicts among governments but also among private actors, as was discussed in the previous section. Moreover, the above-mentioned expanding interaction among societies and almost seamless contiguity between the international sphere and the internal one seem to require innovative approaches to foreign policy-making both in Washington and in the European capitals, including new blueprints for improved international institutions.

How to Take Stock from Global Societal Convergence

Reference was made *en passant* to the counterproductive effects of patronizing attitudes that descend from the assumption that Western values enjoy intrinsic superiority and that liberal democracy constitutes a universal model for all others to imitate. In the wake of post-Cold War optimism, such an assumption led to the push for the creation of a Community of Democracies, intended to reward the democratic nature of partners' political systems and reinforce those groups and individuals fighting for its adoption in other countries, wherever located on the world map.²⁹ Alternatively, the extension of the West's clout over the global space could be dictated by geopolitical considerations and included nurturing relations with neighboring powers, such as Russia and Turkey on Europe's border, even if it might have implied some softening of its pro-democracy and human rights stance.³⁰

Neither option has proven viable and the recent regressive phase in international affairs has made it even more obvious. As for the relentless efforts to spread electoral democracy, especially through American public funds and private NGOs, they have led to a number of misleading or fraudulent elections, susceptible of being adverse to Western interests. Iraq and Egypt stand as recent examples. As for the second option, the leaders of the aforementioned

²⁹See f.i.: I. Daalder, J. Lindsay, [Democracies, of the world unite](#), Public Policy Research, 2007, Wiley Online Library.

³⁰See f.i.: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision. America and the crisis of global power*, Basic Books, 2012.

candidate countries for geostrategic inclusion, Putin and Erdogan happen to be strongmen turned autocratic revisionists of the international liberal order.

American and European policymakers may be well advised to take stock from the growing evidence that many of the transformations that have taken place in the societies of practically every continent over the last several decades – the past one or two in particular – seem to come closer to standards that Western societies had already reached, as pointed out in this analysis. Societal differences – occasionally major ones – remain, but they seem to derive from distant starting points rather than from divergent trends. Indeed a broad, and at least tentative assessment of converging features of change among world societies may be drawn. The focus here is on the need to develop foreign policy strategies that are consistent with such a broad long-term trend of convergence. Western capitals, for instance, should give enhanced attention to the objectives of spreading secular education at all levels, helping women to approach parity in all civilizations, integrating ever larger immigrant populations with aging local citizenries and defending free access to information and communication technologies and networks.

The international impact of policies of this kind may extend well beyond the humanitarian, cultural, social and industrial areas to which they apparently belong. Two major, yet very different challenges the United States and the European states are currently confronted with may help to substantiate this suggestion. One is China, both a geopolitical and geoeconomic

heavyweight, which however has been at pains to exert full control over the societal dynamics of its huge population, despite the pervasive patriotic propaganda and the tight watch by the party over the closed national fabric. The trans-national features of such dynamics are limited, yet they may not have ever been as relevant in Chinese history as they are today. The other challenge is Islamist extremism, a threat to the West as much as it is for the integrity of the concerned states and the survival of their respective cultures. A tough day-by-day action is required to curb such a threat, of course. However, despite the many obstacles that arise for religious, ethnic and political reasons, Muslim fundamentalists are confronted with the change that keeps taking place in their respective societies, whether Shia or Sunni, Persian or Arab. These changes may contribute to calling the shots at the end of what is likely to be long and bloody instability.

Moreover, due to 24-hour news, shocking images and social media, a number of problems are increasingly perceived by ordinary people in almost every corner of the earth as transcending the ever crucial national and local levels to also have an important trans-border dimension, as discussed in the previous section. This inevitably applies first to critical occurrences such as those in the Middle East today and the ensuing massive influx of migrants to Europe. However public opinion may not be as insensitive to longer-term problems as is commonly thought. Indeed, two of them seem to receive a growing attention: the worldwide spread of corruption and tax evasion enhanced by globalization; and the

Internet being infiltrated by crime, terrorism, espionage, even war, all with the “cyber” prefix. Both have de facto joined the planetary issue by definition that is the environmental degradation of our shared earth.

Substantive results in tackling these problems are to be reached within the West also to enhance credibility abroad. The recently disclosed plans by the OECD for a global crackdown on corporate tax avoidance go in the right direction. They follow an ambitious international project launched two years ago by the governments of the G20 in response to surging public anger on the issue. Transnational corruption is also under scrutiny, as it affects consumers as well as business returns. According to an OECD report on 400 corporations in the 41 countries investigated for bribing officials of foreign governments, bribes take more than one-third of the profits.³¹

Tensions have risen instead across the Atlantic as well as between Internet corporations and privacy campaigners on the issue of personal data collection and protection, following the Snowden affair and now the suspension of the so-called “safe harbor” regimen by the European Court of Justice. Up until now, data and metadata have been sent to the U.S. and stored there, possibly with inadequate protection of European citizens from intelligence activities. Without entering into the merit of the issue, it suffices to say that the question of how to reconcile public with private interests, and

³¹The report specifies that oil exporters are particularly active in bribing foreign governments. Prominent among the latter are those of Venezuela, Angola, Libya, Iraq and Sudan in the order.

national security with personal privacy, is possibly the most formidable challenge of the coming future. The United States and the European Union should tackle it upfront and find common ground on the issue, also as a precondition for dealing with global cyber problems from a solid position.

Broadly speaking, it is in the American and European long-term interest to exert leadership to confront these global challenges. Widespread sensitivities, such as those related to corruption and the increasingly popular mantra of transparency, contribute to the emerging of a global public opinion as discussed in the previous section of this paper. Such a development appears to be even more desirable to the extent that Western societies still enjoy some edge and consequent attractiveness over the others, which may be stronger than that of their political models.

These objectives may seem to fall under the paradigm of “soft power”, i.e. the ability to persuade and attract international interlocutors, according to the definition given to it by Joseph Nye as far back as the late 1980s – not by chance on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The subsequent worsening of international relations led him to see the need to make it explicit that soft power would be complementary not supplementary to hard power – i.e. the ability to coerce – in the conduct of American foreign policy, the two being capped together under the label of “smart power.”³² That does not contradict the focus on societal change chosen here. The ability to

³² Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power*, Public Affairs, 2011.

coerce is not confined to the overwhelming military capabilities of the United States, which thus far have been used very selectively by the present Administration, and remain in the background in any case. It can also include action in such domains as the economy and the Internet that are closer to society and also involve non-state actors like corporations, NGOs, and urban conglomerates. Joint economic sanctions – such as those recently applied to Iran and Russia – and preferably coordinated cyber defense by Western nations are two major cases in point.

Moreover, innovative assessment of the new, mostly unexpected challenges that confront us may be part of the use of smart power. To take an example, one may consider the hundreds of thousands of refugees and economic migrants struggling to move from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe and, marginally, to America. The composition of such masses in sociological terms is significantly varied. At the same time thousands of so-called “foreign fighters” travel to combat areas from the affluent societies where most of them have grown up. Often their motivations pertain to the domain of psychology. Both may require more in-depth analysis as that being done currently is under the pressure of urgency. Such an assessment would help in the formulation of effective policies aimed at curbing the latter phenomenon and, as for the former, aimed at improving the conditions of receptivity in the host societies and the prospects of possible future repatriation to reconstruct the devastated countries of origin.

Back to the broader picture, a final point is about international institutions. The current

trend of enfeebling them by clinging to national sovereignty in order to compensate for the diminished role of the constituent states, as discussed earlier in the paper, is not in the interest of either the United States or the European Union and its member countries. The long-term view suggested here is that in order to confront increasingly global and transnational challenges and to take advantage of the evolution and convergence of world societies towards Western standards, international institutions should instead be reinforced and, to the extent possible, reformed. Innovation is required both in relation to the objectives, among which those consistent with such societal dynamics should be given more prominence, and to the participating actors.

The need for innovation applies to an array of purposes, from enhancing joint public and private efforts aimed at spreading education and protecting women's rights, to introducing proper governance in totally new areas such as cyberspace, with its unprecedented mix of stakeholders. In order to strengthen the international rule of law the best approach, in the current adverse phase of world affairs, may be to pursue step-by-step normative convergence, including with nations and regimes that do not protect personal freedoms. They may be amenable in identifying and pursuing universally unacceptable behaviors as well as objectives that are for the benefit of all, also in light of increasingly informed citizenries.

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**The Brookings Institution
Center on the United States and Europe
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
www.brookings.edu/cuse**