

Different Models of civilization – accommodation vs. rivalry

Alfred de Zayas, UN Independent Expert on International Order 2012-18

In the nuclear age, humanity must cooperate or face extinction. The best chance for women and men of the 21st century is to follow the letter and spirit of the UN Charter, notably articles 1 and 2 that lay out the Purposes and Principles of the Organization and the three pillars – peace, development and human rights.

The Preamble of the UNESCO Constitution also reminds us that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”¹ This entails accommodation notwithstanding cultural and economic rivalry.

Alas, the prevailing philosophy in most Western countries is based on myths and “exceptionalism” We in the West believe that we are functioning democracies devoted to peace and human rights. Although the historical record proves otherwise, we keep repeating the myths as a kind of a profession of faith that we are – by definition -- the “good guys” and our rivals are not only less enlightened, but actually “evil”.

Whereas reality could teach us that we have far more in common than differences from each other, whereas our governments have all committed aggression on others, practiced imperialism, colonialism² and neo-colonialism, the mainstream media sustains the myth of our moral superiority and disseminates a stream of fake news, fake history and fake law that lead us to a false sense of security in fake freedom.

What is remarkable is how successful the media has been in brainwashing the public and suppressing alternative views as those formulated by Noam Chomsky, Jeffrey Sachs, John Mearsheimer, Francis Boyle, Stephen Kinzer, Norman Salomon, Joseph Stiglitz, the late Stephen Cohen and other scholars. These professors have delivered the right diagnoses, but their evidence fall into the category of “facts without consequences” their publications into “books without follow-up”.

It appears that Western cultures have evolved in a manner that makes enemies out of potential friends and collaborators, that requires rivalry for its own sake, competition, accompanied by an instinctive fear of others . This peculiar mindset

¹ https://en.unesco.org/70years/building_peace

² See Human Rights Council Resolution 48/7 of 8 October 2021

<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2FRES%2F48%2F7&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

relies on our conviction that we are virtuous, and yet, we do not define ourselves on the basis of our own performance, but only in relation to other “lesser beings”, whom we judge negatively. Only thus can we feel good about ourselves. As if that were not problematic enough, we give ourselves a noble mission: To bring democracy and human rights to others, whether they want it or not.

In this context it is pertinent to recall paragraph 135 of General Assembly Resolution 60/1 of 24 October 2005³ which stipulates:

“We reaffirm that democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. We also reaffirm that while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy, that it does not belong to any country or region, and reaffirm the necessity of due respect for sovereignty and the right of self-determination. We stress that democracy, development and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.”

This resolution reinforces the principles of cooperation formulated in the earlier GA Resolution 2625 (The Friendly Relations Resolution)⁴ and in Resolution 2131 (XX)⁵, which strengthens the fundamental principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, enshrined in the UN Charter, the Helsinki Declaration and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

Sixty years ago, back in the days of the Presidency of John F. Kennedy, there were many enlightened people in government who did believe in the letter and spirit of the UN Charter and grasped the necessity for accommodation rather than rivalry.

At a commencement address on 10 June 1963 at American University in Washington D.C. Kennedy warned his fellow Americans "not to see only a distorted and desperate view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats.”

Kennedy reminded his audience that “No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans ... we can

3

<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2F60%2F1&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴ <http://un-documents.net/a25r2625.htm>

⁵ https://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/ga_2131-xx/ga_2131-xx_e.pdf

<http://www.un-documents.net/a20r2131.htm>

still hail the Russian people for their many achievements--in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage...”

Such words reflect common sense, not blind ideology. “Both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race. Agreements to this end are in the interests of the Soviet Union as well as ours – and even the most hostile nations can be relied upon to accept and keep those treaty obligations, and only those treaty obligations, which are in their own interest.

While Kennedy was not blind to the differences between the US and the Soviet Union, he put the emphasis on accommodation, on our common interests and on the means by which those differences can be resolved. As he stated, “in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”

Kennedy asked the crucial question: “Is it not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights--the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation--the right to breathe air as nature provided it--the right of future generations to a healthy existence?” This is a restatement of Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, particularly the freedom from fear and the freedom from want.

If humanity wants to survive into the 22nd century, it is up to us to do our part to build a world of peace where the weak are safe and the strong are just – and play by the rules. Therefore, as Kennedy said “We are not helpless before that task or hopeless of its success. Confident and unafraid, we labour on--not toward a strategy of annihilation but toward a strategy of peace.”

The United States and Russia are not the only inhabitants of our planet. There are billions of Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, Asians, Africans, Latin Americans who have a right to life. We have no right to endanger their survival because of our ideological intransigence, because of our binary way of looking at the world, neatly divided into good guys and bad guys.

While defending our own vital interests, all nuclear powers including China, Russia, UK, France, India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war.

Kennedy was right in recognizing that “To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy--or of a collective death-wish for the world.”

In the nuclear age, there is no alternative to accommodation. “Unconditional surrender” is no longer an option. “Winner takes all” means nothing, when defeating the enemy and the very concept of “victory” would only mean mutual annihilation.