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A Historical Guide to Navigating a Dangerous New World

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First, let me congratulate the founder of the Asan Institute—The Honorable MJ Chung—and its dynamic President, Dr. Chaibong Hahm—for organizing this remarkable conference. I have been at CSIS for 16 years and we have produced a large number of conferences during this time. I know what it takes to put on a world-class conference like Asan Plenum 2016. You have put the Asan Institute on the world stage, and that causes me to have blend of emotions—respect, envy, and competitive fear. Congratulations to you for such splendid work.

You have entitled this conference "The New Normal". Candidly, nothing feels normal these days. The leading Republican candidate in our presidential primary election process is openly questioning the value of our NATO alliance, and has stated that we negotiated unfavorable agreements with our Asian alliance partners, implying we should withdraw if they don't agree to more generous support of our forward deployments. Personally, I think that is absolutely crazy. I am struggling to find anything these days that feels normal.

You have given me a daunting assignment—to provide a framing address for the start of a very challenging conference. Over the next two days we will be covering a very wide range of topics as we search to answer this question, "what is the new Normal?" Such a large question requires a broadly-gauged perspective at the outset.

This spring at CSIS, we are concluding a big effort that we informally call "the history project". Last year we established the Brzezinski Institute, which is dedicated to a systematic study of history and geography to inform strategic analysis. This history project centered on the question "what is the meaning of the 20th century for today?" We sought to study the history of the 20th century, not from an American-centric point of view, but by asking historians to interpret the 20th century form their national perspective. We recruited historians from Germany, Turkey, India, China, Japan and the United States. At the time we lacked the resources to include other countries, but we have decided to extend the project and will be building on it over the coming year.

We told each historian they had to reflect on the large developments that had global significance during the 20th century—the collapse of the empire system and World War I, the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War, and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. Each needed to touch on these globe-spanning developments, but from a unique national perspective.

I am a political scientist, not a historian. So I will not do justice to their scholarship. But I would like to reflect on this history from the perspective of a political scientist. And I ask myself a key question: why was the first half of the 20th century such a disaster, and the second half such a remarkable period of progress?

First, we need to reflect on the first half. I believe there were three vary large forces that shaped the first half of the 20th century. None of them started promptly at midnight on January 1, 1900. Let me briefly discuss each.

First, from about 1885 until 1914, we witnessed the collapse of the international system that had dominated the world for 300 years. The Qing dynasty was imploding. The Romanovs were in advance decay. The Hapsburg Empire collapsed. We Americans finally destroyed the hapless Spanish empire. The Ottoman Empire was called "the sick man of Europe". The British and French empires were increasingly hollow. The vitality of the great empires that dominated the international system for 300 years was declining sharply. World War I effectively crushed that system.

The second major factor was the rise of popular leaders in the colonies of these empires who were challenging the legitimacy of the empires and articulating a narrative of national expression and destiny. In essence, the empires educated the elites who would rise up to break apart the empires. One feature of colonialism was the most promising children of elite families were given international educations and experiences, with a goal of indoctrinating them into the grandeur of the empire. But these elites began to develop a shared consciousness of the possibility of national independence.

The third force, however was crucial. During the last decades of the 19th century we saw a remarkable transformation caused by new technologies. Most important for this discussion is the development of steam-powered sea transport and the telegraph and under ocean telegraph cables. These technologies transformed political consciousness of elites. Developments in distant lands reinforced political imagination of rising nationalists. For example, Ataturk in Turkey was inspired to learn that Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese war. Steam-powered sea transport dramatically lowered the cost of international travel, so Sun Yat-sen could take an education in Hawaii and travel internationally. Because of the telegraph and undersea telegraph cables, newspapers could now publish events that occurred only days before in distant lands.

The rising popular nationalist elites became aware of the decay of the empires and the success of their counterparts. National elites started to develop a political consciousness by becoming aware of broader developments and ideas.

The 20th century started in the middle of this story of collapse and regeneration. World War I to put an exclamation point on these developments. The European empires were still sufficiently strong to dictate the political outcomes of the post war order, but those outcomes were hugely disappointing to the rising political elites around the world. The European foreign policy establishment didn't comprehend the underlying changes in the world and fashioned a peace that simply set the stage for further decline.

The Great Depression ripped through economies around the world. The collapse of consumer demand in the United States caused a deep recession in Japan for example. Young and relatively immature governments around the world were forced to cope with the local impact of the depression, and deal with forces that extended beyond their sovereign reach.

All countries struggled. Some of them made bad decisions—very bad decisions. Fascism took root in Japan and in German, causing enormous damage and heartache for the world. The Soviet Union coped with it, but only through an astoundingly brutal collectivization process. The forces of fascism and communism took hold and propelled the world to the second great global war in only 20 years.

The first half of the 20^{th} century was arguably the worst period in human history. The vast destruction of human life and material progress was unprecedented. For the first time in history, warfare was not localized by extended globally. Hundreds of Millions of people died in the first half of the 20^{th} Century. It was a horrible time.

But the second half of the 20^{th} century was equally remarkable. The second half of the 20^{th} century witnessed the most astounding burst of prosperity and progress of any time in human history. We humans defeated and eliminated small pox—a disease that killed an estimated 300 million people in the 19^{th} century. Engineers invented aircraft that could take us half way around the world in less than a day. Billions of people who lived on the edge of starvation were brought into comfortable middle class standing. A decade that started with a telegraph ended with the internet.

The second half of the 20^{th} century was just as positive and remarkable as the first half was discouraging and damaging.

To what can we attribute this remarkable transition? To my mind, the most important factor was the establishment of international institutions that emerged after World War II and shaped the second half of the century. We created international institutions designed to address problems that transcend the capabilities of any one country to manage, institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the World Health Organization, etc. These formal institutions were augmented by less formal institutions, such as the G-7, the G-20, the wealth of regional coordination institutions here in Asia. We created a network of institutions designed to create a shared venue to work on problems that extended beyond the reach of any one nation. And we grounded these institutions on a liberal international world view, with values such as "rule of law", transparency, accountability of governments to citizens, an open and a free press, etc. These values and these organizations profoundly changed the second half of the 20^{th} century, and set the norms by which individual nations are judged by their actions.

We are now 16 years into the 21^{st} century, but the second half of the 20^{th} century was the starting point for our day. And here we are at 2016 Asan Plenum to ask the question "what is the new normal?" What is the character of our time and what can we do to improve the trajectory of human life?

Permit me to enumerate a few of the larger forces today that give me concern.

First, technology is again transforming our collective consciousness. In the year 1900, the telegraph created global perceptions, but only among a small number of elite leaders. Today we are living through a time where social media is creating a profound change in political consciousness among vast populations. Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski talks about this age as a vast awakening of political consciousness, creating conditions that are hard for governments to manage. A good example is the political impact of the so-called "Panama Papers" that show how elites on a global basis have created pathways for moving their private wealth away from control of sovereign tax authorities.

Second, this revolution in communication technology now creates an enormous challenge for individuals who have to lead institutions. Those institutions—whether they are governments, corporations, think tanks, or universities—exist within a legal framework of laws, obligations and constraints that underpin their legitimacy, but also limit their speed of action. Those who have no institutions to defend can move quickly and with few external constraints on their action. People who lead institutions are burdened by many crosscurrents of obligation.

Democracies are especially vulnerable at a time like this. Democracies confront propaganda activities designed to unhinge domestic institutions. But they can't respond until they have established the framework of truth and the range of plausible actions. The propagandists are not held to a standard of "truth". Propagandists only have to live by a standard of "efficacy".

Authoritarian governments have become far more effective in using social media for propaganda purposes because the messages they deliver do not have to be true. They only have to be effective.

Those who have to defend large institutions—either governmental or private sector institutions—have a web of considerations they must navigate before they can act. They are handicapped in this new era.

Third, technology developments of the past 30 years have had a profound impact on every nation. Globe spanning communications technology now means design laboratories can be thousands of miles away from production factories. The revolution of transport with the advent of container shipping and intermodal transfer means factories in distant lands can relatively quickly supply consumers a half-world away. Ebola can break out in West Africa and jet transport can bring the disease to America in days.

These new technologies have effectively erased the bureaucratic distinction between national security and homeland defense. Let us consider the refugee crisis gripping Europe. A war in Syria and continuing crises in Afghanistan have brought a domestic crisis to Europe that could break apart the European Union. Yet most democracies have a great divide between their military establishments and their domestic police authorities. This void contributed to the ease with which ISIS terrorists could bomb the airport in Brussels.

These new technologies and globe-spanning business practices are also straining domestic societies. Citizens feel threatened by global economic developments, and fear that their politicians are not protecting them adequately from these forces. We see considerable anxiety in almost every developed country about the viability of the social compact in each country.

Fourth, the cold war thankfully ended without catastrophic violence. But the cold war also left us with a terrible legacy. During this period we learned how to build nuclear weapons, and biological weapons. We have around us vast quantities of dangerous things, and the knowledge to adapt them for vile purpose. Computational biology is now creating the capacity for people to build horrifying biological pathogens, no longer depending on sophisticated laboratories but within the reach of a family kitchen.

The old paradigm of nation states waging war in conventional ways is now distant. But the prospect of destabilizing actions by small groups of people—some with state sponsorship—is very real, and holds the prospect of unhinging entire nations.

Is this the new normal? What can we do about this situation?

The problem comes down to a very simple reality—all of the genuinely complex problems in the world today are horizontal, and all the government structures are vertical. We collectively share a dangerous new world, and we lack the structures of coordination to manage these problems.

There is no uniform and universal solution to this problem. The United Nations is essential, but completely insufficient for the myriad of complex issues we face together. The World Bank and the IMF are essential, but so too are regional financial institutions such as the Asia Development Bank and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. The World Health Organization is essential, but it is far too weak to manage the crises we face and needs revision and augmentation.

The new normal feels very frightening. If there is one strategy for all of us to deal with this frightening new normal, it is the imperative of rebuilding effective institutions of multilateral coordination and response.

At the end of World War II, America committed itself to be a leader of a new international system, one grounded on our shared core values of rule of law, accountability of governments to citizens, transparency, a premium on diplomacy and due process. I continue to think that is the foundation that will carry us through this dangerous era.

I find it very disturbing to hear the leading Republican candidate for President to talk so disparagingly about allies and international obligations. Building a "beautiful wall" to separate America from Mexico is precisely the wrong formulation for our problems. This particular candidate has stated that we need to renegotiate our alliance with Korea and Japan, stating that we agreed to terms that were unfair to America.

I am offended by this. Alliances are not simple contracts. Alliances are obligations that we enter into with conviction and a national consensus. I believe one of the primary reasons why the second half of the 20th century was so much better is because America did not retreat into isolation after World War II, but instead took on alliance relationships and partnerships. America's alliance with Korea is the foundation of America's security. America is more safe and secure because Korea is free and prosperous. Allies like Korea have come to underpin the peaceful order we see today. Allies like Korea have started off as followers of America's lead. But now Korea has gone on to become an international leader in providing public goods, in areas stretching from overseas development assistance, to clean energy development, to nuclear safety and security. There may be some Americans who think that we don't need our allies. But the international order that sustains us today cannot continue without such allies.

America is at a cross roads. Many Americans would like to retreat from being a leader in this dangerous new world. I think that would be a tragic mistake. It is up to all of us to lead a wiser, more thoughtful debate to chart a way forward that is good for everyone in the world. We have to re-create a rational and effective "new normal". And it will take working with allies and with competitors to build this more rational and safe new world.

Thank you for inviting me to join you today, and again my congratulations to the Asan Institute for this very impressive conference.