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Towards ICCS 2022

Humanity's Dark Side: Coping With a Failing World Order

By John, Lord Alderdice

SYNOPSIS

Various crises have exposed fault-lines in the existing global order. It has spotlighted the existing differences in ideologies across the world. It is necessary to engage complexity and conflict differently by paying attention to what the circumstances and contexts illuminate about humanity's dark side.

COMMENTARY

THE FRENCH president, Emmanuel Macron, speaking at a [public meeting](#) during his 2022 election campaign, said: "The world of peace that we used to think was eternal, the world of continuous forward progress that we used to think was unstoppable, all this seems to be falling apart in front of our eyes... What we are living through is a kind of great disorder."

That notion of 'peace and progress' is reminiscent of Francis Fukuyama's view, set out in *The End of History and the Last Man*, that Western liberal democracy was the final stage of societal evolution. Steven Pinker in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* set out another part of the reassuring narrative, held by many intellectuals and ordinary people, that we were on a trajectory of ever greater enlightenment and diminishing violence such that there would be no return to war in Europe. Yet both history and an attention to human nature, tells us something different.

Denying Reality

In recent years I have been warning, in speeches in parliament and elsewhere, that

we were already into the third global conflict in cyberspace, and that it was emerging in other spaces too.

I share the view of a colleague in Britain's Ministry of Defence who said: "If you want to know what President Putin is planning, just listen to what he and his people are saying." In one example from early 2021, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the state-funded Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik, said that war with the United States was "inevitable".

She said she believed that the conflict would break out when, not if, Vladimir Putin seized more territory from Ukraine. Later, in July of last year, Putin published an [essay](#) in which he laid out his view of Ukraine as part of Russia. How could it be that no one really expected him to invade Ukraine?

Psychologists have long recognised that we blot out of our consciousness things that are unacceptable or disturbing to us. Under financial pressure we are all tempted to delay opening bills because we do not want to read the bad news. However, if we then continue spending as though there is not a problem, we are living in denial of the reality.

Learning from the Past

More seriously, humanity wishes to locate its problems in other people or systems, rather than accept that it is in our own nature.

Confronted by the terrible events of World War I, it was believed that these were a result of a systemic problem of European empires whose ambitions could be addressed by decolonisation and the recognition of the rights of nation states who could be engaged in a League of Nations.

The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the defeat of Japan with nuclear weapons disrupted this optimistic view. Germany, one of the most educated and cultured countries in the world, had engaged in the industrial-scale murder that we call genocide in the Holocaust.

In addition, we now had weapons with the destructive capacity to render the world uninhabitable for human beings. Perhaps a new global 'rules-based order' could be the solution?

Coping with a Failing World Order

The United Nations would provide the table around which disagreements could be resolved; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would set out the principles of international law; the Nuremberg trials would be the precursor of an International Criminal Court that would punish those who were guilty of crimes against humanity; and the Bretton Woods institutions would prevent the economic crises that were believed to have contributed to the war.

At first there seemed to be some evidence that these measures were indeed bringing

a new world order of peace and progress. The European project moved from economic cooperation to political union.

The Berlin Wall came down, signalling an end to the Cold War. The International Criminal Court (ICC) came into being. Arms control talks ensured that the stocks of nuclear weapons began to reduce, and proliferation seemed to be manageable.

However, all these positive developments have failed to prevent disastrous wars right across the world. Now, the climate change crisis may result in the slow death of human civilisation.

Losing History and Humanity

Instead of facing the reality of the dark side of human nature, we have turned away from the clear lesson of history.

The German people, traumatised by the awful things they had done, refused to take responsibility for the military defence of their own country, and Europe was more than content to have Germany militarily neutered but providing the industrial and economic muscle for the European Union (EU) as we know it today.

The end of the Soviet system and the democratisation of Eastern Europe also seemed to promise a peace so secure that its protection could be outsourced to the United States of America.

Today, the UN is dysfunctional and cannot maintain global peace. Global economic cooperation and stability has broken down, and with Britain no longer in the EU, it is little wonder that President Macron is wondering aloud where to turn.

Start with the Unwelcome Truth

There is no simple, easy solution, but we could make a start by facing the unwelcome truth that there is a dark side that is intrinsic to all human nature and that we must engage with humanity as it is, rather than as we wish it was, or hope that it might become.

We ought also to realise that the promise of an entirely rationalist approach to life and society is neither possible nor desirable, and that liberal democracy is not a political panacea. We cannot divorce what we think from how we feel, nor should we do so if we are to have any hope of preventing our own demise.

We would be wise to acknowledge the presence of thoughts and feelings, negative and positive, in ourselves and our people, as well as in others, and to adopt a more open-eyed engagement in the never-ending process of managing our complex, conflicting, communal relationships.

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