How to Prevent and Respond to Conflict in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Does the International Community Have the Right Tools?

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In the past five to six years, after a steady decline since the end of the Cold War, the numbers of conflicts and of victims of conflict have increased. Today, conflicts last longer and generate more casualties, displaced persons and refugees. A total of 65 million people have become refugees and displaced because of violence, the largest absolute number ever in recent times. Over half of the refugees come from three countries – Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. About 85% of the 65 million victims are hosted by developing countries that are relatively fragile, portending a potential vicious circle in the movements of people. Furthermore, in countries like Lebanon, the inflow of refugees has changed the delicate balance among different domestic religious communities and could result in more conflicts.

The new reality is that old conflicts don't die and new ones start, and that ending

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conflicts has become increasingly difficult as they become more resilient. All this is happening in a context of deepening global and regional rivalries, erosion of international norms, and exploitation of local grievances by non-state actors with criminal or radical agendas. These worrying trends should trigger a reexamination of the instruments of conflict prevention and resolution.

The Post-Cold War Moment is Over

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, there was excessive optimism on the future of the world. We remember the first (George H. W.) Bush administration talked about creating a "new world order" in 1990, but today we are still a long way from that. Certainly, this is not to say that the post-Cold War moments were all sunny, as immediately after the Cold War nasty conflicts still happened in Yugoslavia and genocide took place in Rwanda. But we did see the end of long-standing conflicts and tensions in Southern Africa, the independence of Namibia, the end of civil war in Mozambique, as well as the peaceful settlement of the Cambodian conflict. All these required a level of convergence among major powers that is absent today.

That kind of optimism was somewhat warranted in Europe. The Organizations for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was established with the vision that all "Western" countries ranging from the U.S. and Canada to European countries and Russia – after the fall of Soviet Union – would follow a certain set of rules that could change the nature of past confrontations in Europe. There would not be a "West" anymore.

In hindsight, such optimism happened during a period of extreme weakness of Russia, and at a time when China had not yet grown into a big power. In some way, it was a "unipolar" moment, although less so than the year of 1945 which has been the only true unipolar moment in recent history. In 1945, the U.S. was the creditor of the world, had a monopoly on nuclear weapons, and produced half of the world's GDP, as Europe and Japan were destroyed by war and the developing world had not yet emerged. In the 1990s, the world was no longer unipolar, but the one truly dominant power in the world was still the U.S. and the model it embodied shaped the world.

In contrast, the current world is quite different. Firstly, divergence among the five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council is deepening, particularly between Russia and the U.S. A particular danger is that there lacks an agreement on the status quo or a clear way to change it. Take the situation in Europe for example, Moscow sees the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 as a low point in Russian history. It lost Crimea, which had been Russian since the 18th century (in the context of the Soviet Union, its transfer to Ukraine in 1954 had no practical consequence). Moving away from these low points and restoring its advantaged position in the international system are certainly Russia's strategic goals. This doesn't mean such goals have to be achieved by force though. However, the narrative in the West is completely incompatible with Russia's perspective. From the West's perspective, Russia is challenging the legal order to which it has subscribed, and the elements of limited Western engagement with Russia, which had

benefitted Moscow, are being more or less dismantled. It is very difficult to reconcile the two narratives.

Such divergence not only affects the European order, but in reality goes beyond. For example, at the UN Security Council permanent members cannot reach agreement in situations where there could be a convergence of interests, due to increasing division and competition. It would be interesting to see whether China will be part of that process of polarization and become a close partner of Russia or help bridge differences. Given such a new dynamic in the Security Council, this central body of the international security system is often paralyzed, and will continue to be so if it remains incapable of adapting and evolving.

Secondly, a major difference from the post-Cold War moment is the increasing importance of regional actors and the hardening of their position. For instance, in the Middle East, partly because of the uncertainty of security assurance provided by the U.S., and partly because a non-ideological world is more fluid and unpredictable, regional actors like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran are flexing their muscles and asserting themselves. This can trigger an arms race. A similar trend of seeking self-reassurance due to a lack of or inadequate U.S. security assurance is also emerging in Asia.

The third difference from the post-Cold War moment is the rise of China as a central actor in international relations. China has transitioned from a time when it only focused on domestic transformation to a time when it can influence the world. The world today is no longer bipolar, but rather multi-polar. But again, with no clear understanding of what the rules are, there is no guarantee of peaceful evolution of the status quo.

The fourth difference is that we are in a much more bottom-up world, in the sense that understanding local dynamics is essential for resolving many conflicts. This more bottom-up trend has quite significant implications for international security, in the sense that today we have a much more multi-layer definition of conflicts. The different layers of state actors, regional actors and global actors are all connected. Aligning those different layers and circles to resolve conflicts is quite challenging. Although local actors are connected to – and sometimes even dependent on – regional and global actors, the former are not puppets of the latter. Such close interaction could draw regional and global actors into local conflicts, but global actors are often ineffective in containing local conflicts because their influence is often limited.

This is well demonstrated by the current situation in Syria, where two global powers – Russia and the U.S. – are positioning themselves in the Syrian conflicts with the actions of local actors not fully controlled. It's a dangerous situation. In other words, it is a kind of a "1914 scenario", where a local crisis was connected with but not controlled by the big powers and eventually drew them into a world war. The difference today is the existence of nuclear weapons, which leads to greater caution of global actors. However, local conflicts can still be a trigger for larger-scale confrontations.

Lastly, another key difference from the post-Cold War moment is the crisis of multilateral institutions and tools. In the post-Cold War early days, there was a sense that

the norms that the UN had held needed to be upgraded with more ambition, as exemplified by the concept of responsibility to protect (R2P) or the development of international justice with the foundation of the International Criminal Court (ICC). While today's international society has gone beyond the regulations of inter-state relations organized by the UN Charter, we see those once emerging post-Cold War norms are receding today. There are various views on the reasons for the retreat in the emergence of new norms and of the institutions that would underpin them. One could argue that the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya went beyond the understanding of the Security Council's resolution on the situation in Libya and damaged the emerging norm of R2P. The same is happening with international justice, as some African countries are also challenging the ICC: Uganda authorities recently welcomed Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir for a two-day official visit, defying their obligation to arrest al-Bashir who is wanted by the ICC for serious war crimes.

With regard to the "crisis of null tools", firstly there is an "intervention fatigue". There was an enormous expansion of interventions during the last 15 years, some inspired by a liberal agenda, like UN peacekeeping, and some by a neo-conservative agenda like the U.S.-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. These UN and U.S.-led interventions are carried out under the premise that the targeted countries could be reshaped by external actors. In reality, however, reshaping countries has proven much more difficult than anticipated: for instance, a UN peacekeeping mission is trapped in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the fear that its pullout could lead to a renewed violence. After the American-led intervention, Iraq is still a country under stress. There have been doubts on whether we know what we are doing with these costly interventions. That certainly leads to a greater reluctance to intervene shared by all members of the Security Council.

Meanwhile, the effectiveness of the less dramatic instrument of sanctions is going down. More often than not, they are a sign of weakness, rather than strength, of the international community. In addition to sanctions authorized by the Security Council, European countries and the U.S. also often impose sanctions on perceived violators. However, once sanctions are imposed, it's hard to decide when to withdraw them, which creates greater doubts on their effectiveness.

Last but not least, the supporters of interventions are now often perceived as sources of instability. It started from the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq which destabilized the balance of power in the region. Furthermore, domestic politics increasingly drives international politics among all countries. It's a sign of structural weakness in the world: there is no agreed frame of reference to which we can anchor international policy.

The Post-World War II Era is Over

Actually, not only the post-Cold War moment is over, but also the post-World War II Era is over. To support this argument, I would like to make the following three points.

Firstly, there are new types of conflicts that don't fit in the framework of the 1945 UN Charter. The turning point happened during the Clinton administration, when the U.S. in

1998 staged retaliatory attacks against terrorist bases in Sudan and Afghanistan in response to terrorist bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. This was followed by the 9/11 attacks which led to the war in Afghanistan in 2001 under the George W. Bush administration. The UN Charter was meant to constrain the unilateral use of force by states in international affairs except in cases of self-defense. The right of self-defense usually is invoked when a state's territory was attacked by an external force, in which case the state has the right to defend itself. When a country experiences a terrorist attack from another country that doesn't have full control of its territory, does the former have the legal right to strike the latter's territory as was done by the U.S. to Afghanistan in 2001? That was an extension of the concept of self-defense. It changes the balance of the UN Charter: traditionally, such an attack would require a decision by the UN Security Council; but suddenly the U.S. could unilaterally decide to use force under the guise of self-defense.

Cyber space is another area of conflict that was unanticipated in 1945. What is the act of war in cyber? Does it include a cyberattack destroying a country's industry and creating massive turbulence in its economy? Can a cyberattack be considered as an act of war without actual loss of life? These questions again reveal grey areas beyond the scope of the UN Charter. The consequence is an increasingly blurred line between war and peace. And the increasing trivialization of the use of force has potentially serious political consequences.

Secondly, the end of the post-World War II era is demonstrated by the absence of ideological confrontation in the world. In a sense, the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of wealth have merged. It's interesting to see the emerging tensions between the power of money and power of politics today, as exemplified by the anti-corruption campaigns launched in European countries and also by the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia, as well as the enormous influence of money on U.S. elections.

The development of personality politics and its emphasis on personalities – rather than on political programs – leads to a more fluid and unpredictable domestic political scene, which is more prone to external influence. This could help explain Russian's influence on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Interestingly, such kind of influence is much easier to achieve when there is no fundamental ideological divide. It would be hard to imagine in the Cold War era how the communist Soviet Union could have dramatically influenced the democratic United States' domestic politics. Also, without ideological divide, it would be easier for countries to shift alliances over different specific issues. In that sense, today is more like the 19th century, rather than the 20th century of ideologies.

Thirdly, the sources of a state's legitimacy are changing, and there is growing disagreement on what should be expected from a state. The legitimacy of a state has long been a combination of historical legitimacy and the legitimacy based on delivery of services. Today we see states' historical legitimacy is eroding. The notion of geographically defined communities is also under stress. As a reaction to a sense of loss of identity, nationalism is on the rise. It is a 19th century world in a 21st century twist, in the sense that nationalism today is less of a way for communities to assert themselves than a defensive

reaction of communities besieged by transnational trends.

This point is of strategic importance to understand terrorism today. Terrorism today is a symptom of the fragility of states, or, more specifically, of the identity crisis of states. Terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but what's new is its impact. The globalization agenda, as well as increasing physical and informational connectivity, has considerably amplified the impact of terrorist attacks. Terrorism is much more a product of conflicts, than a cause of conflicts. Religion is also becoming a substitute for political identity. Terrorism therefore is a symptom of political identity being weakened or destroyed, but not a strategic threat itself.

Implications for Conflict Prevention and Resolution

Then, how can we adjust our tools for conflict prevention and resolution in this changing world? Firstly, we should focus on conflict prevention. We have seen how difficult it is to solve and end conflicts once they start. Therefore, keeping societies together before they are affected by conflicts should be a top priority.

Secondly, we need to recalibrate our ambitions. The excessive optimism shared immediately after the end of the Cold War is over, and its proposed approach of seeking to reshape societies is unrealistic. Each society needs to deal with their own problems, but today we are much more connected with each other than ever before. It is a key political challenge of our time to strike the right balance between recognizing the future of any human community belongs to the people of that community and nevertheless getting international society sufficiently involved to help.

Thirdly, peacekeeping operations need to evolve. Peacekeeping is largely viewed as a military-driven exercise, as if peacekeepers could fundamentally change local political situations. They are only a means to an end, but cannot produce or impose a solution by themselves. The forceful intervention by the U.S. in Iraq, which was of much greater strength than any usual peacekeeping operation, has failed in helping Iraq find its balance afterwards. If a massive military intervention cannot improve the local political situation, what can peacekeepers with their limited means do? The political strategy should therefore be at the heart of any peacekeeping operation. The UN's effort of bringing the Department of Political Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping to work more closely together makes much sense. However, the problem will not be solved if there is no agreement on the future direction of peacekeeping at the level of UN Security Council, which makes it difficult to craft coherent political strategies for peacekeeping operations.

Fourthly, peacekeeping is to take the full benefit of the international security architecture. The current international security architecture is not a neat and united structure, but rather varies from region to region. For instance, in Asia there is no overarching regional security framework, and existing organizations like the ASEAN have limited mandates in dealing with security affairs. The European Union, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are more advanced in regional security cooperation, and have more resources. In Africa, there are the African Union and sub-regional

organizations, with varying levels of strengths and effectiveness in promoting security. It is very important for the UN to develop a better relationship with regional organizations in the future. My experience in Africa also shows that the region often wants some kind of involvement of external players, to avoid being dominated by regional major powers.

Last but not the least, we should place a greater focus on politics. There has been a long debate on addressing the root causes or the symptoms. Promoting development to improve people's lives is essential. However, believing just development would do it is somewhat naïve. It depends on how the benefits of developments are distributed, as uneven distribution can increase tensions. The periods of transitions are often also periods of tensions. By focusing on politics, we have to think about how to have all the various components of society benefit from changes and economic growth. A purely technocratic view of conflict resolution doesn't work. For example, in South Sudan where political divisions still exist, focusing exclusively on infrastructure development is tantamount to building a project on sand without any foundations. It is therefore important for development efforts not to ignore the local political dimension of conflicts.

Q&A Session

Q: Many thanks for your very balanced and inspiring speech. I would like to ask how you define international community. Where and why is the international community divided? How can we seek a somewhat integral, united international community that can lead us to prevent crisis from happening?

A: Today the concept of international community is more of an aspirational concept than a reality. The existing set of principles on which the international community has agreed is not enough to stabilize the world, because of new changes and conflicts beyond its scope. Just regulating relations between states is not sufficient to address all the issues. That's the underlying difficulty. We still haven't developed a set of principles that guide us to tackle new emerging issues in the world, while tensions over some traditional principles such as the non-interference in domestic affairs of sovereign states are increasing.

So there's no international community. But there's a need for it and for a set of rules in a world where connectivity is high and economies are interdependent. The multilateral efforts for reaching an agreement on common global economic rules are now being challenged by Trump. In the security sphere, there is even less international consensus than in the economic sphere. It's urgent for countries to gradually develop mutual understanding of the rules of engagement in the security sphere.

Q: How do you see the challenges and prospects of Chinese peacekeepers' doctrine of "peace through development", in comparison with the French doctrine? How can the Chinese doctrine be engaged in the UN peacekeeping framework?

A: I am not sure there's a French philosophy of peacekeeping. The French peacekeeping practice is a reflection of our own history. Based on French revolution and French civilization, no stable order could exclude the engagement of all people. What forms the engagement takes vary from one country to another. Stability is a key element; so is the

inclusiveness of the political system. In a way, good peacekeeping should combine Chinese and French philosophy. It takes a combination of all these elements – including cooperative leadership, stability and development – to make peacekeeping effective.

Q: Do you think the ICC and the International Court of Justice will remain good tools to prevent and resolve conflicts in the future world? How efficient and effective do you think they are now?

A: I'm cautious over the question of international justice. I do agree that stability requires reconciliation. Individual accountability is important, as you don't want injustice to persist in a country, and when there is no individual accountability, the risk of collective retribution and revenge increases. Justice is important for the functioning of a country. But we need to keep in mind two points. Firstly, the timing of justice matters, in the sense that too hasty pursuit of justice could upset stability and create more political division. Secondly, the international justice system has often been seen as a tool of politics, rather than justice itself.

There are of course many examples where the international justice system has been useful, and it is tricky but necessary to assess the broader impact of specific cases. In some situations, it may have a deterrent effect on potential perpetrators. But that is not always the case. The sense that state or individual violators could be held accountable might not be an effective deterrent. In some cases, it could be an incentive not to budge, because one might end up in jail if he or she budges. International justice today should be used with great caution and full consensus of the international community. When it is set in motion by the UN Security Council, the Security Council should support what it has initiated.

Q: Does the Asian community have the right tools for sustaining regional security and prosperity? Do we need any new tools to contain nuclear proliferation in Asia?

A: I am not sure if one can purely rely on regional arrangements for nuclear governance. The current framework of nuclear arms control is essentially a bilateral framework – between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union – inherited from the Cold War. It's under considerable stress not just because of Trump, but also due to the revolution of technologies. There should be an effort to multi-lateralize the cooperation and agreement for nuclear arms control amid technological revolution. This is relevant for Asia and other regions. Otherwise, there's a serious risk of nuclear arms race. The nuclear issues remain the single biggest risk for the humanity. It's particularly true now, as we see the Non-Proliferation Treaty at serious risk with the North Korean nuclear development and potential fallout of the Iran nuclear deal.

(Transcribed by Hu Ran)