Issues & Studies 34, no. 10 (October 1998): 10-24.

The End of the Century: Emerging Themes, Disappearing Themes

AKIRA IRIYE

As we near the end of the century, many are hypothesizing on the characteristics of the coming epoch. Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" argument has been one of the most hotly debated predictions. This article critiques Huntington's theory of probable future developments by looking to the past. In 1897 noted naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that modern technological advances were leading to increased contacts between civilizations and thus the twentieth century was likely to see violent conflict between the West and a modernizing East. Noting that the twentieth century was actually characterized by conflicts mainly within the West itself, as well as between Eastern countries, this author argues for the necessity of taking a wider view of the characteristics of international relations. In addition to the forces of power, economics, and civilizations, there are many non-geopolitical forces that characterize interaction between states. Many such cooperative efforts are being made in the areas of human rights, economic and social cooperation, cross-border humanitarian concerns, the environment, scholarly exchange, and technical cooperation. Moreover, these efforts began to occur before the end of the Cold War and have developed independently of geostrategic concerns.

Keywords: conflict of civilizations; modernization; human rights; environmentalism; forces of internationalization

---

Dr. Akira Iriye is Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard University. His most recent publications include *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* and *Japan and the Wider World*, both published in 1997.

* * *

As we near the end of the century, many are striving to make sense of the contemporary world in order to prepare for the new millennium. They are asking the common question "What have been the major themes of twentieth-century history?"

One interesting way to open the discussion is to go back to an essay Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote in 1897. In "The Twentieth-Century Outlook," the noted naval strategist argued that the coming century was likely to see a conflict of civilizations, specifically between the West and the East. The rise of the non-West, in particular East Asia, was bound to challenge Western supremacy in world affairs. This, however, was an inevitable outcome of the coming closer together of peoples and races, which itself had been made possible by modern technological advances that established a "multiplication of communication" throughout the world. As European and North American technology narrowed distances among the regions of the globe, the non-West was fast transforming itself. Such a phenomenon—which would later be called modernization—was already turning Japan into a formidable military power and promised to give China, with its "immense latent force," its place in the sun soon thereafter. The twentieth century, Mahan believed, could witness a terrible conflict between the West and the modernized East. A non-West untouched by modern civilization was no threat to Western civilization, but a modernized East clearly was. To cope with the coming crisis, it would be imperative for the Western powers to ensure that non-Western peoples become spiritually, as well as materially, Westernized so that both worlds would contribute to the welfare of the whole human race. But if such a prospect could not be counted upon, and Mahan was very pessimistic in this regard, then the West would have no choice but to strengthen its military might in preparation for the expected onslaught by the non-West. In such a conflict of civilizations, Mahan concluded, the United States had a particular obligation to identify itself with, and lead the struggle for the continued supremacy of, Western civilization.

Mahan's predictions were echoed by Samuel Huntington exactly a century later, but his predictions were to prove wrong. In the twentieth cen-

tury, contrary to what Mahan anticipated, there would be no conflict of civilizations, certainly not the sort of struggle for supremacy between the West and the East. The Western powers, instead of uniting against the alleged menace of a rising East, fought each other in two suicidal wars in which the United States took sides with some belligerents against the others. Asian countries, instead of challenging Western supremacy in unison, also become divided and fought against one another. Alliances cut across the borders between East and West and came into conflict with other such alliances. At the same time, Western values and not just Western technology and arms spread to the rest of the world. While powers rose and fell and economic centers of gravity shifted from region to region, a world civilization began to emerge. Moreover, forces never mentioned by Mahan—categories outside of power, economics, and civilization—entered the world arena, giving international relations a new definition. In all these respects, the twentieth century has proved to be characterized in ways little imagined by Mahan, and there is no assurance that contemporary observers predicting the shape of the twenty-first century would fare any better.

On the other hand, whatever may have been Mahan's shortcomings as a prophet, one could admit that his emphasis on conflict did accurately previsage the world of the twentieth century. He believed that "conflict is the condition of all life, material and spiritual," and, indeed, the contemporary world has been fundamentally shaped by conflict: world and regional wars, civil strife inside many countries, revolutionary violence, and the Cold War. In such conflicts, the themes of power, economics, and civilization tend to be woven together as nations seek to maximize forces of destruction by mobilizing all their resources. Participants in these confrontations represent a combination of power, economics, and civilization in various proportions, but there is little doubt that the successful agents have been the states that have made the most effective use of their military, economic, and cultural resources.

It is no accident that the wars of the present century have coincided with the establishment of powerful states and centralizing armed forces that have dictated how economic resources are to be utilized and how individuals should live. For this reason, the present century has also been characterized by the growth of centralized state authority in all parts of the world.

The phenomenon has been apparent in both democratic and totalitarian countries, and in newer as well as older nations. The fact that this century has seen the creation of over two hundred new states has necessarily multiplied the possibilities for interstate conflict—although it has to be recognized that by far the most violent clashes have taken place among the more established powers. In any case, wars have militarized nations, and militarized states by definition exercise expanded governmental authority over the lives of individuals within their borders. In some such fashion, power, economics, and civilization have tended to be amalgamated together in this century of constant warfare and violence.

Against this background, can we expect that the twenty-first century would be shaped by different forces, that power, economics, and civilization would not combine, as they did in the twentieth century, to bring suffering to the world? Some suggest that a nation's power will come to hinge less on military force than on economic competitiveness, while others hold the view that civilizations, rather than states, would emerge as major units in world affairs. Most observers agree, however, that conflict will continue to define international relations for years to come, whether this confrontation will take the form of military, economic, or cultural clashes. It is difficult to argue against such a generalization, but it may be noted that in focusing their attention on conflict, these commentators are postulating a rather traditional definition of international affairs. It may very well be that they are correct in characterizing international relations as being fundamentally geopolitical in character, in which military, economic, and cultural assets of nations produce an inherently conflictual world.

It is also possible to argue, however, that international relations in the twentieth century have revealed many other themes besides wars, violence, and various types of conflict both among and within states. Moreover, it may also be true that some of these themes may grow in importance in the coming years. Comparing the world today with that of a century ago, one will notice not simply the destruction and disappearance of cities, historical monuments, and works of art due to international and civil wars, not simply the widowed, maimed, and other victims of war. The contrast may also be found in the fact that there are nearly three times as many people living on the planet, that individuals are living longer, that many diseases earlier con-

sidered incurable have been eradicated, and that the traditional family system has been seriously eroded due to the fact that both men and women in most parts of the world are far more mobile. All these phenomena are products of the twentieth century, and any generalization about this history of this century will have to take them into account.

In addition to the differences noted above, there are also themes particularly relevant to international relations, themes that have little to do with war, violence, or conflict. These additional themes may be called non-geopolitical in the sense that they do not relate directly to power-level relations among states. Among such themes are: international efforts at promoting human rights; various schemes for regional cooperation in economic and social affairs; humanitarian activities across national boundaries; worldwide movements for protecting the physical environment and preserving endangered species; student, scholarly, and other exchange programs; tourism; and the convenient sharing of information throughout the globe due to technological innovations. In this essay, I shall briefly discuss some of these developments in the hope to show that there are many ways of both looking at the contemporary world and in imagining the shape that the next century will take.

It should be noted that these developments have tended to be discussed in the context of the end of the Cold War, as if this, admittedly momentous development, has necessitated a restructuring of world affairs. To divide history by wars or cold wars is, however, to be trapped in a geopolitical framework of analysis. It is important to recognize that such non-geopolitical themes as those mentioned above have had their own historical trajectory that would have developed irrespective of geopolitical phenomena—although in reality, of course, the geopolitical and non-geopolitical have affected each other in numerous, often decisive, ways. To stress non-geopolitical themes is to give twentieth-century history an alternative or complementary reading; it opens up new possibilities for interpreting contemporary world trends. Such an exercise may also enable us to develop a more balanced perspective on the coming century than would the adoption of an exclusively geopolitical framework. The question of power, economics, and civilization may in turn take on fresh significance through this new perspective.

The promotion of human rights through international cooperation is a good example. Although the principles behind the human rights doctrine were first disseminated in the Atlantic community in the late eighteenth century, it was only in the twentieth, in particular in the aftermath of World War II, that they were seen to be of universal applicability. This was clearly indicated in the Charter of the United Nations. The 1945 document asserted in unambiguous language that all member states of the world organization were committed to the principle of human rights. The 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" issued by the United Nations specified that human rights embraced the principle of the equality of all individuals, regardless of race, religion, language, gender, or political opinion. Created in the wake of the war, such sweeping assertions reflected the commonly held view that the racial hatred, atrocities, and genocide that had abounded in international and national affairs in the recent past should never be allowed again. It is interesting to note that nothing comparable had been enunciated when the League of Nations was established in 1919. Even an innocuous statement affirming racial equality, which China and Japan proposed at the Paris peace conference, failed to be incorporated into the League covenant because of the opposition on the part of most Western nations. In 1945, however, there was no excuse for rejecting an adherence, at least in principle, to the doctrine of racial equality. If nothing else, the idea that "crimes against humanity" had been committed by the Axis powers implied the existence of a worldwide norm of behavior. Moreover, the United Nations had many more non-Western members than the League, and this sizeable force pledged to see to it that racial equality would constitute a basis of postwar international affairs. When the United Nations established a Human Rights Commission, non-Western countries became particularly active, eager to do their share to ensure that racial equality as well as other human rights would be practiced in all countries.

That there exists greater equality among the races of the world at the end, rather than at the beginning, of the twentieth century, must surely be seen as a major theme of contemporary history, especially the history of the second half of the century. Geopolitical phenomena like the Cold War do not reveal the whole story. Indeed, in some ways the Cold War may have perpetrated racial injustice; note, for example, the reluctance of the United

States and its allies to condemn South Africa's apartheid, or the Soviet Union's suppression of ethnic minorities within its empire. The Cold War ended, but the struggle for racial equality continues. The key point to note here is that this story has had a momentum of its own, with its beginning clearly antedating the geopolitical confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. With the Cold War now part of history, it is likely that human rights will increase in importance as an issue in international affairs. This is not a question of power, economics, or even of civilization for human rights have been defined by the United Nations as being universally valid principles. The yearning for equality, freedom, and justice cannot be seen as functions of geopolitics but are rather among the most fundamental of human needs and aspirations. Although they tend to be obscured in periods of geopolitical crises, these rights are never going to disappear regardless of whether or not there will be more wars and conflicts in the world of the twenty-first century. Moreover, because human aspirations are indivisible—one cannot simply aspire to racial equality, for instance, and overlook freedom of religion—the global movement for human rights will take many forms and exert various kinds of pressure until obstacles to the realization of human rights are removed.

It is worth noting that movements for human rights have been undertaken by individuals and private organizations much more vigorously than by governments. When states deal with human rights as an issue in diplomatic negotiation, it is difficult to remove geopolitical considerations altogether. The ongoing U.S.-China dispute on human rights is a good case in point. While the U.S. government professes its adherence to universal human rights, it hesitates to make this the basic guide to its policy toward China. Washington has to consider many other issues—Chinese armament, Taiwan, trade—and balance its support for human rights against these other objectives, most of which are not always congruent with each other. The government in Beijing, for its part, is loathe to admit that China is less observant of human rights than other countries as its leaders cannot accept a loss of prestige such an admission would imply. The United States, for that matter, has not always considered human rights a major foreign policy objective. It was only in the 1970s that the government in Washington began pushing for the spread of human rights in the Soviet-

bloc nations and elsewhere. Until then—and in some cases even after the 1970s—the U.S. government had been reluctant to condemn human rights abuses in countries that were anticommunist. In those years, and in the period since then, nongovernmental organizations have been the main force pushing for human rights issues.

The role of nongovernmental organizations in international affairs is a very important aspect of contemporary history. Various nongovernmental and semigovernmental organizations had been active in promoting cross-national (student, scholarly, artistic) exchanges before World War II. These activities continued to prosper, and were vastly expanded, after the war. In the last half-century, however, literally tens of thousands of nongovernmental organizations have focused their energies primarily on more broadly humanitarian endeavors, including the promotion of human rights. It is not difficult to understand the historical background for this development. While state authority steadily expanded throughout the Depression and war years, the governments were so preoccupied with fighting economic crises at home and waging wars abroad that humanitarian activities had often to be carried out by private organizations. These organizations filled the gaps left by the state and, not surprisingly, dealt with problems of individuals—including refugees, stateless persons, migrants, and orphans —marginalized by the Depression and the war. Religious organizations took the lead in offering assistance; the offices of the YMCA and YWCA, the Catholic International Union for Social Service, the American Friends Service Committee, and the World Jewish Congress are but a few conspicuous examples. What is interesting is that these were international organizations, with national branches. Efforts by such organizations in various countries were coordinated through an international body, as if to compensate for the demise of the League of Nations which had also been active in refugee resettlement. In the aftermath of the war, even more non-state bodies were organized and older institutions were revived, many of which were devoted to the promotion of human rights.

For instance, as early as 1951, twenty-three nongovernmental, international organizations were participating in the deliberations of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. These included the World Federation of Trade Unions, the World Federation of United Nations Associations, the

Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, the Friends' World Committee for Conciliation, the International Bureau of Penal Law, the International Council of Women, the International Federation of University Women, the International Union for Child Welfare, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. All organizations except for the last were established, or became active, only after 1945 and all were interested in coordinating national efforts on behalf of human rights through international agencies. Because they were nongovernmental organizations, these institutions were relatively free from state restraints and were able to speak their minds and carry on their tasks. Thus, whereas U.S. and Soviet delegates on the Human Rights Commission often clashed for ideological reasons, representatives of nongovernmental organizations were freer to engage in less polemical, less ideological, and less geopolitically oriented discussions on the best means of eliminating, in the words of UNESCO Director-General Torres Bodet, "the prejudices militating against recognition of the diversity of all human beings." The fact that the United Nations became an arena for the discussion and promotion of human rights indicates the importance of nongovernmental organizations, for the United Nations had from its inception looked to them as well as to governments to carry out its objectives. Whereas security matters were dealt with by governments, economic, social, and cultural issues were frequently referred to nongovernmental and semigovernmental bodies. That may explain why, even during the height of the Cold War, human rights and related issues were never cast aside by the United Nations.

This has been a story of international cooperation, not interstate conflict. It is true, however, that states have clashed over the human rights question, the most notable recent example being the various nations' condemnation of the Chinese government in the wake of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, and the latter's adamant refusal to accept such criticism. However, such instances pale in significance to the consistent promotion of human rights represented by the activities of such nongovernmental organizations as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. These organizations, along with such older institutions as the International Red Cross, have proven adept at reaching out to imprisoned and incarcerated individuals in many countries, something governments hesitate to do for fear

of being assailed for an interference in domestic affairs of a sovereign nation. This suggests that human rights and other non-geopolitical issues that require humanitarian responses across national boundaries are best dealt with by non-state organizations. Just as international conflict and a geopolitical definition of world affairs go hand in hand, international cooperation would seem to be interchangeable with the growth of non-state actors. International cooperation may be a misnomer since cooperation is taking place among nonnational institutions. Still, the fact is undeniable that their efforts have been one of the most remarkable aspects of recent international relations, indicating the need to postulate a new concept of international relations, one that goes beyond the geopolitical formulation based on the existence of sovereign states as the key actors.

The same argument can be applied to humanitarian, environmental, and other movements that have sprung up across national boundaries. Working along with, but sometimes independently of, the United Nations, many humanitarian organizations have helped victims of famine, flood, earthquakes, and epidemics throughout the world. A few of them predate World War II, such as the International Red Cross (1863, Switzerland) and the Save the Children Foundation (1919, Britain). The majority, however, are of more recent origin. CARE was established in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and the Catholic Committee against Famine in France in 1961.

One of the most famous organizations, Doctors Without Frontiers, was founded in France in 1971 and quickly gained world recognition for their daring initiatives to go anywhere they were needed—thus often being labeled as "subversive." As explained by one of its founders, Doctors Without Frontiers often cannot wait for governmental authorization or bureaucratic procedures before they act. The organization has established branches throughout the world and has thus become an international body, a nongovernmental world agency in a sense.

Doctors Without Frontiers, as well as other humanitarian organizations, have been particularly conspicuous in developing countries, suggesting a close link between humanitarianism, on the one hand, and problems in less developed areas, on the other. Although human rights abuses and natural disasters are not confined to developing countries, the latter often

lack technological and administrative apparatus to cope with disease, famine, child abuse, and other similar problems. Humanitarianism and human rights have thus been instruments for organizing the world not in terms of territorial states but rather in terms of nongovernmental organizations. These have grown so numerous that super nongovernmental agencies have developed to coordinate their activities and exchange information. Such organization costs money, and it is not surprising that the mushrooming of nongovernmental organizations since the 1970s has brought about phenomenal increases in their budgets, from less than US$200 million in 1970 to over US$5 billion in 1990, more than half of the amount coming from private sources.

International movements for protecting the natural environment and preserving endangered species have also gained strength in recent decades. Before the war, such movements were small in scale and mostly confined within national boundaries—efforts in the United States to preserve wild forests being a well-known example. It is difficult to date precisely the moment when environmentalism became an international movement, but surely it arose with the spectacular economic growth in many parts of the globe after World War II which brought in its train polluted air, water, and land. Industrialization has been accompanied by the destruction of forests and farmland: urban population centers have overburdened sewage facilities and dumped waste into rivers and oceans, and factories and automobiles emit chemical elements that pollute the atmosphere.

However, these phenomena came to be recognized as being seriously damaging to health and to the natural habitat only in the 1960s, the decade of unprecedentedly high growth in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia. Environmentalist movements emerged in these areas and began calling for stricter rules against industrial waste. But it was evident that individual countries could not cope with the crisis through their efforts alone as the natural universe was not identical with or divisible into political units. Thus from the beginning environmentalism was synonymous with cross-national cooperation, where some restrictions on sovereign rights were inevitable. The movement was, for the same reason, strongly pursued by nongovernmental organizations, which were less restrained in speaking up for the rights of the physical world as against the rights of

sovereign states and more anxious to internationalize their activities. Many environmental bodies held their own world gathering in 1991, and in the following years their presence has been increasingly conspicuous at United Nations conferences on the environment.

These movements have developed quite independently of the vicissitudes of geopolitics. While nations fight wars, hot and cold, and threaten each other through armaments they produce and trade, individuals, non-state actors, and sometimes even governments have taken steps to protect humanity's common heritage. In doing so, they have demonstrated that all nations and peoples share something in common, and that geopolitical considerations and interstate competition and conflict define only one reality. There is another reality defined by the environmentalists, and this reality has impinged upon human consciousness with great force in the recent decades because industrialization has become a worldwide phenomenon, accompanied by a larger consumption of food and energy by an ever-increasing number of people. The planet earth, in such a perspective, is in danger not so much from wars as from peace, the peaceful economic development of nations. The protection of the environment—even as the earth's resources are being devoured—is a global commitment by all humans. International affairs become human affairs in such a context. This, too, is a theme of growing importance.

Another remarkable phenomenon of the post-1945 world is the development of regional communities such as the European Union, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). To be sure, the origins of such communities go back to earlier times, and most of them have focused on regional economic integration. However, in the context of this discussion, regional communities can also be viewed as yet another manifestation of the growth of international cooperation in human rights, environmental, and other issues. As such, they may be seen as an integral part of the non-geopolitical story of human affairs. It is a vital step in the movement toward an even more global system of cooperation. Just as economic affairs are becoming less territorial and more global, thereby necessitating some universal standards of commercial conduct, there may eventually emerge worldwide codes of behavior concerning human rights, the environment, and other issues.

These universal codes may even come to claim precedence over national sovereign rights.

For centuries, visionaries have dreamed of an earthly paradise in which individuals throughout the world deal with one another without prejudice, without hatred, and without chauvinistic passions. All such dreams have been shattered by the realities of violence and war. Is there any greater likelihood that the dreams entertained today will turn into reality? One cannot tell. Sovereign nations—all two hundred and more of them—will never willingly dissolve themselves, and nationalistic passions and prejudices will always be around to provide a core of existential identity to individuals. Instead of developing a sense of shared interests throughout the world, many may retreat to their parochial world-views and self-centered definitions of what matters. "Citizens of the world" may be a foolhardy vision when stateless persons and undocumented migrants envelope the globe. Territorial states may reassert their authority to control such population movements and to protect their space and resources for the exclusive use of their own people. Geopolitics may return with a vengeance.

Such a world would be indefinitely simpler than what we have today, yet precisely because geopolitics is so straightforward a proposition, it is also unrealistic and unrealizable. Realism today does not lie in realpolitik but rather in the recognition of the transformation of international affairs into human affairs. If nothing else, the fact that a vastly larger number of individuals—literally hundreds of millions of them—are in daily contact with one another through the medium of satellite television, telephones, fax machines, and electronic mail, calls for a new mode of analysis, not just a reprise of traditional conceptions. The revolutionary changes in the information and communications technology are creating a global community linked by computers. All have access to the same information, emanating from an increasing array of sources, and individuals anywhere may communicate with each other, voluntarily or anonymously, thus widening the circles of communicators. The result is a network—only partially visible—connecting people throughout the world. This network is incorporating more and more people into a global community, and this community is more open than almost any other organization. In the meantime, the emerging global civilization is being reinforced through tourism. Eco-

nomic well-being, social democratization, and cultural curiosity combined to produce massive waves of tourists in and out of North America and Western Europe, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Whatever the level of their educational background or intellectual sophistication, the tourists—today numbering almost one billion, or almost one out of every five inhabitants of the earth—establish networks of acquaintances and create a world community quite apart from the geopolitically defined world order.

Of course, just because people of different countries mingle more and more with one another does not mean that the world is necessarily becoming more congenial or peaceful. Is there any assurance that all this human contact is not likely to give way to less generous forces as soon as requirements of realpolitik confront them? Of course, there is no such assurance, but that does not mean that forces of internationalization today are as marginal a phenomenon as they tended to be in the past. These forces are far more diversified and far better institutionalized than ever before. The development, through the decades, of cross-national cooperation, on the one hand, and of non-state actors, on the other, gives us some hope that there may in time emerge what an Indian diplomat called, in 1960, "the human family [sharing] common values and laws."

However one characterizes the world at the end of the twentieth century, it is a far more complex one compared with a century ago. One could continue to discuss world affairs, as Mahan did, by focusing on a handful of powers, on economic development in various parts of the globe, and on Western and non-Western civilizations. But actors in today's global drama also include international and regional agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and Internet-linked individuals in all countries.

It may very well be that such a complex world is more unmanageable than ever. Indeed, the growth in number of terrorists, drug-smugglers, and clandestine arms traffickers suggests that there are many forces today that are not easily controlled by sovereign states. Some of these forces are benign, tending to international cooperation and interdependence, others are malicious, prone to lead to divisiveness and destruction. To combat the latter, it would be all the more important to reaffirm the strength of internationalism through cross-national cooperation, through the activities of

nongovernmental organizations, and through the sharing of technology and information so as to develop a sense of common human interests. Years ago, the World Jewish Congress stated, "nongovernmental [organizations] should be encouraged and strengthened as representing elements and aspirations in international public opinion which must play a significant role in the development and consolidation of a genuine world community." Whatever roles powers, economies, and civilizations are to play in the future, their effectiveness will be judged by the extent to which they will have contributed to the creation of an "international public opinion" promoting "a genuine world community."