

Finale

International Affairs in the New Millennium: A Futures Perspective

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The finale to this edition of JILA critiques existing paradigms of material progress and development and argues that a planetary crisis of unforeseen proportions is arriving and it can only be resolved through major paradigm shifts. The author contends that core concepts which have driven the foundations of knowledge in the social sciences, particularly the study of international affairs, have to be replaced with new forms of consciousness about the future as an emergence which is beyond the control of human will or ingeniousness. The article proposes that we are at a tipping point wherein fundamental assumptions about the eternal dominance of the nation state or of individual over group and man over nature are out-dated and suicidal. He suggests a new paradigm based on deeper realisation of humans' place in the cosmos and construction of a new 'critical identity' that is less destructive of planet earth.

"The planet has enough to meet every human's needs but not for every human's greed"

-Mahatma Gandhi

A PERFECT STORM

International affairs in the political, economic, socio-cultural, religious and other realms have to be considered, understood and addressed in the context of an emergent planetary 'Mega Crisis' that is best described as an impending 'Perfect Storm' unlike any other in human history, threatening

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the very existence of humans as a species on the planet. This impending crisis will not be readily apparent or comprehensible if international affairs are viewed in time frames of years or even decades, but will be quite obvious if the time frames involved are in hundreds of years or even millennia.

Mistaken and foolish notions about “saving” the planet have become the central focus of global efforts, whereas what is urgently needed is focus on humans “saving” themselves from extinction. The planet has been around for nearly 4.5 billion years, and according to estimates, it is likely to be around for another 6 billion. It is important to note and heed the fact that 99.9 % of all that ever existed is now “extinct” and humans as a species are not exempt.

The following is an attempt to outline the nature of the Mega Crisis, the attendant symptoms and causes in temporal scales that are “long term”, and an appeal to pause, rethink and help participate in and create a new paradigm to ensure survival going forward, provided it is not already too late.

THE MEGA CRISIS

The Mega Crisis, simply put, can be described as the impending collapse of the planetary system, inclusive of humans, due to the ideas, values and assumptions that have formed the basis for human endeavours as it relates to progress, development, the limitless power and value of human agency on the one hand, and the resultant devastation of the planet on the other. It should be pointed out that, a basic fact which has been overlooked, with the exception of one external input, the Sun, the planet is a closed system with everything on it being a “fixed” amount, even as humans have multiplied into the billions and continue to grow in numbers, thereby pointing to the inevitability of “exhaustion” of every resource. Known and as yet unknown, due to the notion of progress and development measured in economic terms of material consumption without limits.

SYMPTOMS OF THE CRISIS

The list is long. Symptoms abound at all levels of human society and organisation, from the local neighbourhood, to the community, the city, the state, the nation and much more obviously and profoundly, at the global level. To name a few of these signs: climate change, economic collapse, the recent implosion of the free market system, the impending end of the

fossil fuel age, the threat of a nuclear holocaust, extreme poverty for more than three quarters of humanity, accompanied by paralysis on multiple fronts. This paralysis is rooted in the conduct of international affairs via strategies that imply continued enslavement to a set of ideas but with caution and with the hope and prayer that this will somehow produce a different outcome. Einstein described this strategy as “insanity”. Examples of the paralysis are numerous.

The debates about a sustainable future for humans are mired in “nationalism”, the failure to adopt global climate change protocols, the lack of seriousness in getting to the abolition of nuclear weapons, economic models/paradigms of progress, growth and development based on gross summing of the value of the monetary exchange of each transaction without consideration of whether each of these transactions is a positive or negative in terms of wellbeing of society as a whole. For example, the monetary value of building hospitals for dealing with diseases of “progress” and of jails for holding criminals are both added instead of being subtracted. Or for that matter, these computations do not take into account the cost of repairing resulting tragedies of the commons in the future, or the cost of robbing future generations of their share.

Perhaps the most intractable symptom is the fact that all of the symptoms described above are being dealt with and being treated as “problems” or “root causes” in and of themselves, thus masking the need to look deeper to determine the real “root cause”. Such an approach will do nothing more than ensuring the consummation of the collapse. One finds an utter and complete absence of “critical thinking”, because arriving at the “root cause” would undermine the very foundations of the dominant paradigm. And the reluctance to look deeper is reinforced because it would mean the beginning of the end of the “vested interests” that control the political, cultural, and economic realms.

THE OPERANT PARADIGM

The operant paradigm is rooted in a set of civilisational driving forces that can be described in terms of the nature of the relationship between a) humans and humans, b) humans and the planet, and c) humans and higher powers. These driving forces have evolved overtime and emerged through thousands of years, but have gathered momentum and dominated human affairs only over the last two millennia.

The Royal Geological Society described it best as the onset of the “Anthropocene”, meaning the dawning of an “epoch” where humans dominate the planet and have altered it irreversibly and therefore have caused an impact similar to geological events of the past that had profound effects on the planet, including extinctions. All previous epochs had their origins in geological or other factors.

It should be pointed out at the very outset that the origins of the fundamental ideas underpinning the operant paradigm are not an outcome of reasoning or knowledge, but articles of faith and belief handed down presumably by agents and agencies of the supreme. These ideas can be summed up as follows:

1. Humans are the apex of creation who are divinely ordained to be in charge
2. Humans and Nature are apart and separate from each other
3. Nature has been given to humans to subjugate, exploit and use over the last couple of millennia and more so in recent centuries
4. The above three principles are reinforced with notions of the power of human agency, human infallibility, autonomy and ability to design and create futures at will
5. There is a divinely ordained “obligation” to carve out the future through human genius

A key concept that has buttressed these principles is the “scientific method” and a newer set of ideas that progress can be linear and unlimited, and that we as humans are duty bound to pursue such progress, defined as “scientific humanism”. The “supreme”, which was hitherto understood as unfathomable and supernatural, is in the process of being dispensed with and replaced by the crowning of “humans”. This philosophy is translated into modern economic terms such as Per Capita Income, Gross Domestic Product, and Free Markets and so on without comprehension or concern about the attendant tragedies of the commons.

Additionally, at the social, cultural and economic levels, intellectual dishonesty reaffirmed the above mode of thinking with ideas of “free will”, “individualism” and equality, accompanied by contempt for the “collective”. These form a devastating combination of ideas that are squarely responsible for the current state of affairs. What is worse is an unquestioned continuation of faith and belief in them with absolutely no inclination to examine or revise any of them.

Let us not forget that human propensity to create and rely on wrong ideas is nothing new. Our history is replete with examples. It was not long ago that humans thought the earth was at the centre of a single universe, only to find out that is not so. After assuming that we were divinely created, apart from and above all other forms of life, humans found out that all that we see around us has existed for billions of years before we arrived and that we are descendants of the Bonobo, sharing 98.4% of their genetic makeup. It is also a reality check for us to know that a grain of rice has more genes than we do.

So what is best descriptive of the present moment is that we stand at the threshold of a plethora of planetary issues of our own making, but faced with the need to recognise and acknowledge our own insignificance and unimportance as a species. Our godlike sense of “self” is shattered and in ruins, calling for a thorough rethinking.

The overriding question is whether we are prepared to think in terms of a major course correction with regard to our sense of who we are and our relationships with all that is around us, or if we will continue to operate within the current paradigm, unable to extricate ourselves from it. The prospects are not encouraging.

It seems we are, evolutionarily speaking, hard wired to look no farther than the current generation or, at best, the next as to the implications of what we are doing. Our capacity to “react” and change course appears limited. What may be the case however is that this time around, we may not have the time or capacity to react, given the magnitude of the “mega crisis” about to unfold? For sure, what is evident is there is a vague unease about it all, that there is something seriously wrong.

The vocabulary and the narratives being used in our discourses is no doubt shifting. Sustainability, earth as mother goddess (Gaia in Greek mythology), voluntary simplicity, Gross National Happiness as opposed to GDP, our obligations to “future generations” etc. are bandied about, but such language coexists with strategies that do not dare question the central themes and ideas of the operant paradigm. These strategies are best described as “more of the same”, with lip service to the need for course correction.

FUTURE AS EMERGENCE

An important exercise that needs to be undertaken is to understand how the future actually comes about. It is not in the scope of this essay to

present a detailed picture. Suffice it to point out that the future, contrary to our belief that we create it, is actually an emergence. It is an emergence that is best understood in evolutionary terms.

Cultural evolution is a more exact frame in which the emergence can be studied. It is a process in which competing memes are selected for fitness over long periods of time. Memes, inclusive of all of our ideas as inputs to a system, determine the outcome as an emergence that we have no control over.

It is important to note that, in this sense, what might seem like a spectacularly successful paradigm for nearly ten thousand years based on our ideas is what has created the outcomes that we are currently grappling with. And so, the indications are clear. Our ideas over the last ten thousand years are actually wrong and on the verge of obsolescence, and actually the reasons for the disappointing and destructive results seen until now. Another way to look at this is that we are doomed to continue functioning within the paradigm if we do not stretch and extend the time frames of consideration of such phenomena.

A thorough overhaul is in order. As an aside, it is important to point out that for any course correction to take place, education of the billions of humans is what is now needed. This has to be an education which does not reinforce the ideas and the values of the dominant paradigm, but rather education that presents the truth as reverse of the ideas of the dominant paradigm, so as to permit informed choices and decisions.

It is important to briefly explain the concept of emergence. Simply put, emergence is the result of a complex interplay of variables on three Axes. The first Axis is the individual, at once functioning with multiple identities at various levels (individual, family and community). The second Axis is the varieties of social, cultural, religious, economic and political systems within which we are located. The third axis is the biological, zoological, geological and atmospheric domains.

The process is one in which individuals are not random walkers but are actually active walkers by virtue of their participation, conditioned by and operating within a set of ideas and values, but the outcomes are entirely outside of their control, simply by virtue of the fact that the complexity of the interactions is too great for any approach that would result in a desired outcome.

This trajectory is complicated further by the fact that such inputs and participations are provided within a framework of individuals with the autonomy to optimise self-interest. The emergence has elements of criticalities, tipping points, self-organisation, chaos and stasis. The process is best illustrated by the oft-repeated example of a butterfly flapping its wings in one location causing a tornado in another distant location.

Students and theoreticians and practitioners of international affairs would do well to familiarise themselves with these ideas, if they are to be more effective in their pursuits. To reiterate, enabling a bottom-up revision of ideas and norms that facilitate reasoned and informed participation by individuals within the framework of a substantially altered paradigm of ideas and values is what may avert the mega crisis. It is entirely likely that even such a course correction may be too little too late.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: SPECIFIC PLANETARY TRANSITIONS

Specific to international affairs, given the preceding as it relates to the importance of comprehending things in terms of evolutionary processes and time frames, it will be useful to outline the major transitions that are occurring on the planet. This set of transitions would not otherwise be readily apparent because of the extremely short time frames in which students of international affairs operate and think.

A. The Beginning of the End of the Nation State

It should be fairly apparent that the nation state as a unit of consideration will never disappear but that its relevance for solving the major issues of our time is diminishing on an hourly basis. This conclusion will be self-evident by asking a simple question: Name a single issue that is being currently debated internationally that is amenable to be solved by and within nation states? The answer is none.

It is also fairly apparent that aggregations of supra-national entities in every realm of human affairs are being put together also on a daily basis. Entities and entreaties for 'Global Governance' reflect an over arching need. It will come about sooner or later, in more and more formal ways. This is not to say that the nation state will disappear, but what will occur is that it will keep declining in its dominance as the unit of political identity for humans.

B. *Knowledge vs. Faith and Belief Systems*

The intersection of the accumulation of knowledge on the one hand and of ideas of faith and belief systems that have been around ever since humans have existed on the planet is now approaching a criticality or a tipping out. It was pointed out earlier as to the shattering of the myths that humans accepted and believed and which have now proven to be false. This process is now accelerating as a result of human mobility across the globe and globalisation, and will soon create an untenable situation for the basic tenets of faith and belief systems.

In this sense, this author will dare to suggest that the so called “clash of civilisations” or regression of societies to religious and cultural fundamentalism is actually the last phase in their respective fights for survival and will soon give way to reformations across the spectrum. This is of course not to say that ‘God’ is dead. It is unlikely that notions of ‘God’ will be given the last rites anytime soon, because ultimately humans will have a difficult time getting used to the idea of the absence of meaning and purpose in their lives and will therefore need God and the idea of a life hereafter. This recourse however is likely to be contained and constrained within their personal domains.

C. *The Individual vs. the Collective*

For centuries, the power, influence and autonomy of the individual has steadily increased, even if at different rates in different societies. Thus, in a zero sum sense, it has eroded and in some instances eliminated the power of the collective in many ways in formal structures relating to human affairs. But we are at a threshold of reconsideration of this drive to individualism. Many of the pathologies of human society, the excesses of the economics of *laissez faire*, and the multiple tragedies of the commons are pulling humans back to an appreciation and importance of the “collective”. A balance somewhere in the middle between individual and the group is what is likely to emerge.

D. *Bottom Up vs. Top Down*

Even as the need for Global Governance is emerging in all matters of significance, the intractable and inflexible structures below, in the middle and at the bottom are beginning to be on shaky grounds. New knowledge and technologies are making it abundantly clear that humans

can communicate and organise for common goals across and outside of all levels of formal governance. This is a powerful new force on the planet that is likely to cause upheavals in many of the areas of human affairs with utterly unpredictable outcomes.

Wikileaks and the Arab Spring uprisings are only the beginnings of this transition and it is likely to gain in its momentum toward change. It should be pointed that the dangers posed by such runaway revolutions are limited. This is because group selection, altruism and sacrifice of self for the collective are also phenomena that are present in the evolutionary process of emergence of the future described above.

E. Globalisation

This theme has been explored to exhaustion. But it will be worthwhile revisiting it. Globalisation is prevalent in the current discourse as if it is something new. This author would like to submit that it started when modern humans emerged out of Africa nearly sixty to eighty thousand years ago, and the process has continued. What is new of course is that globalisation is reaching a tipping point.

What needs to be understood is that this is a process that cannot be designed toward desirable outcomes or that there is a moral or ethical or other value of “good” or “bad” that is assignable to it. What we are witnessing is globalisation warp speed, whereas it used to be at snail’s pace in earlier times. It will have implications in every aspect of human affairs. What might emerge, much to our chagrin, is a homogenisation of all of the variables – culture, politics, religion, genetics, and over evolutionary time a “planetary imprint” – but of course passing the tests of “selection for fitness” and survival. There is no point or use in lamenting this outcome. It is not a question of “if” but “when” and the evidence in favour is already fairly apparent.

CONCLUSION

As it pertains to international affairs and the planetary issues that we as humans are facing, solutions exist and the future will emerge with or without our intervention. We would be well advised, however, to undertake a serious re-examination of our most passionately held ideas about ourselves and our place on this planet, “The Pale Blue Dot” (a photograph of planet Earth taken in 1990 by the Voyager 1 space craft from a record

distance of about 6 billion kilometres) is the only home we know and have. It must start with each individual making an attempt to ask and answer the simple question: who am I?

Solutions require deeper realisation that all our identities at multiple levels and the complex interactions that we are part and parcel of must be circumscribed within a supremely critical identity for ourselves. That we are first and foremost citizens of the planet has to prevail and all other identities must take second place, instead of the other way round. Anything less will doom us to extinction and time is running out. That we are part and parcel of the “system” and not over and above and independent of it is a critical truth that must be inculcated into the formal and non-scholarly pursuit of international relations.

We would do well to know and understand that 99% of all that ever existed is extinct and that we are not and will not be exempted. John Donne’s immortal verse comes to mind:

“No Man is an Island. Entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a Clod were to be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thine own or of thy friends. Every man’s death diminishes me because I am a part of mankind. So, do not send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee.”