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Trying to find an answer to the questions which have been formulated requires, in my opinion, a brief overview and assessment of the world situation we entered into since only a few years ago. Processes, in the strategic, geopolitical and geoeconomical field, which have been going on almost unnoticed under the surface, have in a very short time come to the fore, and through their concrete effects, have upended the main features of the international scenario we have been accustomed to at least in the last thirty years. The final result of all this, in reality, is the possible completion of a long phase of history, characterized by Western hegemony which lasted for several centuries, and the ushering in of a new historical cycle whose main traits are still totally unknown, hardly predictable if not for their complexity and uncertainty.

This seeming coming to an end of an entire historical era, though, is not easily detectable nor definable and it is usually perceived only after the lapse of a considerable period of time. Consequently, we feel more comfortable in evaluating the years which are immediately behind us. In doing so, we believe we are on firm grounds in saying that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing ideological victory of the West, which unfortunately and mistakenly was considered also as a decisive geopolitical success, we enjoyed only a decade of superb illusions: the idea that we had come to the end of history, that the triumph of democracy and capitalism was acquired for good and that humanity was on a sure track towards progress, prosperity and peace. We had only for a few years an international architecture based on a unipolar scheme nourished by the overpowering resources, economically, militarily and politically, of the United States.

Then the illusions suddenly collapsed with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which had the effect of bringing the US down to earth signifying that the unipolar world was coming to a halt. The shock of the Twin Towers gave the United States the ultimate energy and stamina for exerting unlimited force in launching the ill-fated Iraqi adventure which showed the limits of military power and democratic expansion as well as the eventual isolation and strategic disarray of the USA. The final blow to the Western convictions and certainties of the superiority of our system came with the financial, economic crisis of 2008. It reminded us of the inner faults of the capitalist economy and its recurrent lapses into economic slowdowns, recession and prolonged stagnation with all their social and political implications. These developments were finally compounded by the globalization forces which had been shaping the world over the previous two decades, thus identifying the West with globalization itself, while provoking those economic and social dislocations which finally brought to the present-day difficulties in Western societies.

As a consequence United States was led to slowly deemphasize its foreign policy and international multilateral involvement, at the beginning through the gradual and cautious disengagement of the Obama administration and later on by the drastic, traumatic retrenchment of the Trump administration under the aegis of “America first” motto, although America’s isolationist tendencies, in the midst of a polarized society, simply conceal a new, immense effort to contain China which, no doubt, is aiming at a sort of world supremacy.

Europe, on its part, while recovering much more slowly from the great recession started in 2008, simply discovered the short comings, the contradictions of the European construction, especially those coming from the adoption of the “Euro” (in itself a successful currency). At the same time, the advent of massive migratory inflows produced perilous realignments between North and South,

East and West in Europe. Beyond the still unresolved trauma of Brexit, member states are now struggling with internal divisions between a pro-Europe electorate, on one side, and populist parties opposing the perspective of an ever-closer integration, on the other.

These brief outlines of the present state of affairs in America and in Europe offer the image of a Western world in a real predicament in terms of internal cohesiveness and external coherence, in the face of the emergence of aggressive, apparently less fractured new centres of power.

This is the general landscape, the “*toile de fond*”, on which to gauge the replies to the questions being addressed.

The Middle East has not yet recovered – far from it, it has instead deepened its difficulties – from the trauma of the collapse of the Turkish empire at the end of WWI. For very long centuries the Arab world was structured into some sort of administrative, geographical subdivisions, with very little or no national character in them, under the overarching religious and political dominance of the Caliphate whose seat switched through the centuries from one city to another. For almost the previous 400 years before WWI, the Caliphate coincided with the Turkish Sultanate. It is now well over half a century that, after the colonial period, the Arab world is trying to find a principle on which to base the solid foundation of a modern state. They tried the nationalist, the socialist, the federative approach: each one failed, leaving the various Arab countries finally enthralled with Islam as the guiding, though uncertain, principle to follow in the search for modernity at the beginning of the 21st century.

Of course, in the Islamic Sunni world there are two outstanding countries that history has endowed with sufficient individual characters in such a way to transform them into well structured states, Egypt and Turkey. But even in Cairo a sort of military rule became necessary in order to forestall the consolidation of a regime based on the Muslim Brotherhood; and in Ankara the autocratic government of president Erdogan has been leaning ever more towards Islamic features and attitudes in view of keeping power. In the same vein, and almost paradoxically, the most stable countries appear to be those dominated by a religious configuration such as Saudi Arabia (beyond the stabilizing effect of oil) and Morocco.

Iran, on its part, is the other country in the Middle East that can boast of a statist continuity through history: in fact it is, with China, one of the most ancient countries in the world with extraordinary traditions in culture, political thinking and power exercise, which nourish a strong sense of self-consciousness and national pride. But it is a flag-bearer of a different stream of Islam, Shia, which is presently at loggerheads with Sunni Islam. The taking of power by a theocracy in Teheran, forty years ago, contributed to the expansion of a Shia message and of Iranian interests.

Teheran is heavily involved right now in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq and by proxies in Yemen. No doubt that Teheran’s nuclear program, halted in its military dimension in 2015 by the six-powers accord, has now indirectly given way, after the US receding from the agreement, to one of the most serious crises in the region. The confrontation between Iran and the US risks transcending into an all-out war. Independently from any assessment of the reasons of each side, there is no denying that Iran has not worked as a stabilizing force in the region, in contrast with the assumptions of the Obama administration.

The Israeli-Palestinian issue is not right now in the forefront of events: but the profound causes of the conflict are still totally there, if not compounded by the unrelenting drive of Israel in making new inroads on Palestinian territory and “sovereignty”. At present, the sore points at the Israeli frontier are Gaza, Syria and potentially Lebanon and Iran. With all its staying power not even Tel Aviv can be counted upon as a stability factor in the Middle East.

In summing up, the two major crises, which marked the region over the last ten years were due to the Arab springs and to ISIS terrorist designs: the first, a positive future-oriented phenomenon (but

with a catastrophic fall out as in Syria and Libya), the second the dramatic and violent expression of a return to a dark past of religious predominance. The Middle East is still struggling to find an up-to-date version of a compromise between modernity and Islam. The massive participation in the regional conflicts of great foreign powers, in the pursuit of their own individual interests, is such that, far from contributing to “untangling the Gordian Knot”, it complicates further the reduction of tensions and the search for stability and long sought for peace. It is, in my view, a severe diagnosis and a problematic prognosis.

As for Eastern Europe, the developments in the region in the last ten years seem to depict a sort of negative reaction to the Westernizing programs and ideas embodied by the European Union. When the accession took place, hopes were high in Brussels and other capitals. What was evidently underestimated was the impact of the recent past and of history in general on Eastern European countries. These countries have quite recently recovered freedom and self dignity from the previous domination of the Soviet Union and communism. The notion of national identity was much more important there than in Western Europe. Consequently, whatever came from Brussels in terms of tentatively supranational common approach (not certainly the huge flows of money) provoked rigid responses in the Eastern capitals and whatever assuaging, adaptive stand towards Russia emanated from Western Europe was countered with distrust and suspiciousness. Especially after the Ukraine and Crimea events of 2014, the old anti-Moscow fears were heightened and fueled a pro-NATO Americanism which instead in the course of time was thinning out in Western Europe. The wrenching dilemmas posed in our capitals by president Trump’s policies and declarations are not recognized as such in the East. Thus, the American president’s role has become one more source of friction between the two sides of Europe.

It would be wise, in my opinion, not to overemphasize these differences which are there to stay, anyway. Eastern Europe might have a somewhat distinct development from the rest of the European Union: this would be more respectful of history and less of the internal cohesion of the Union. But the real challenge for the future of Europe lies not in the East; it lies instead in the Western part of the continent. It is up to the Western members of the Union to sort out their difficulties as to what course of action to follow: whether to enhance integration, removing or alleviating the obstacles that have so clearly emerged after 2008, or to downsize expectations to the level of a newly found will to accept transfer of sovereignty to the Union. The results of the recent European elections are an important element in this debate which will keep going on for the foreseeable future.

Actually, there is a specific, incisive, policy component in the differentiation between Eastern and Western Europe we witnessed in the last four years and which contributed greatly to the internal malaise of the Union. It has to do with migration policies and here we come to the third question.

The immigration problem is an epochal problem, which will be facing Europe in particular for many decades to come and which, on the basis of present demographic projections, appears almost irresolvable. The rigid stance taken by the four Visegrad States has been accredited as the stumbling block, the culprit for the lack of an agreement within the Union as to the redistribution of asylum seekers. It is the firm view of the author of these lines that this judgement consciously overstates the importance of that stance in order to conceal the reality: practically no member state is prepared to accept the principle of redistribution because the respective national public opinions – weary and wary of the challenges of integrating the hundreds of thousands of foreign people already incorporated – are quite reluctant, to say the least, to engage themselves in welcoming undetermined numbers, for undetermined periods of time, of additional extra-European migrants. The general mood in Europe is, and will continue to be, not sympathetic to the arrival of new irregular flows of migrants. The defining line should be the distinction between real asylum seekers and economic migrants. But international norms prohibit the “refoulement” of any person arriving on the receiving countries’ shores (or frontiers) and require the acceptance first of the migrant, then the evaluation of his/her possible asylum request (which, by the way, takes one or two years to be

processed), while eventually, for those not recipient of the refugee or humanitarian status, authorizing the lawful rejection towards the originating country of the migrant (who in the meantime may have disappeared in the “wilderness”). The European Union member countries are not in a position to find common ground particularly on the modalities of the acceptance of the flows, on the possible limits of the asylum system and on the possible need to come to an updated interpretation of humanitarian international law in the light of the “incontournable” profiles of reality in which Western countries find themselves to live in.

The migration crisis has proven to be an illuminating litmus-test in order to better understand the present currents of international affairs. It showed:

- the lack of solidarity among EU member States in such a way that it is legitimate to ask ourselves the question on the real possibilities of reaching out for a federal Union for the time being;
- the negative aspects of globalization which, along with the economic and social dislocations it has implied, appears to be heading towards a bumpy road;
- the dilemma confronting Western societies divided between further opening and a regressive and defensive posture;
- the declining of the Western world in an international context where it will not have the final say anymore.

On this realistic note I conclude my remarks, recalling that the last millennium has seen the gradual shifting of the centre of power from the far East to the West, through Europe and the Mediterranean. It has already left the Atlantic and is moving now towards the Pacific.

Students are strongly invited to study history intensively, to try to understand the often dramatic challenges facing humanity, which has done so far very little to contain the destructive forces at work, to engage themselves in the political arena to assert above all the principle of unselfish public service, and to feel the moral obligation to do whatever they can to prevent tensions, criss-crossing every society, from degenerating into irretrievable conflicts.