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Preface

Asia in the Global Context

When looking back at 2013, there are three things that can sum up the global situation: One main line, two main trends, and three centers.

One Main Line

On December 25, 1991, the Soviet Union broke up, bringing an end to the Cold War. This marks the end of the Yalta Conference bipolar system after the conclusion of World War II in 1945, and the US became the world’s sole superpower. In my opinion, after the bipolar system ended, the world has been heading in a multipolar direction. This is a very lengthy transition period in which the main line of international relations is a struggle between a unipolar system and a multipolar system.

The Cold War ended 22 years ago, and when we look back on those 22 years, the struggle between a unipolar system and a multipolar system is plain to see. We all remember when the US started the Iraq War on March 20, 2003, under the pretext of combating terrorism and Iraq having weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The US was determined to fight Iraq, but many countries in the world did not approve; France and Germany were resolutely against it, China and Russia also did not condone an attack.

Facts later proved the US’s pretext for fighting Iraq to be untenable. Its pretext was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. However, after the US military fought its way into Iraq, it searched high and low and yet could not find these WMDs. A WMD inspection and disposal team was put together by the UN, whose chairman, Hans Blix (a former Swedish foreign minister), is a friend of mine. He was resolutely opposed to the war in Iraq, believing that Iraq’s WMDs could be dealt with entirely by UN inspection teams. But the US would just not have it, it had to go to war.
The US bypassed the UN Security Council to fight Iraq, whose authorization would have made an invasion of Iraq legal, and lack of authorization would have made it illegal. The reason the US avoided the Security Council was that many of its member states were against the war. Before and after the US launched the war, the UN secretary-general at that time Kofi Annan said that launching the war in Iraq without the authorization of the Security Council was illegal. At the end of October 2013, I met Mr. Kofi Annan in Brussels. He is also a friend of mine and we have known each other for many years. We talked of his speech he made at the time on the Iraq War, he told me: “After I made the speech, the Americans were not happy and started to make things difficult for me.”

So why did the US want war with Iraq? We all remember how elated the US elite circles were after the breakup of the Soviet Union, believing history to have come to an end, and that the US was to be the only superpower that could control the world forever more.

However, it is a trend in history that the world tends towards a multipolar system. Before and after the Cold War ended, a group of countries began to rise up including those in Western Europe, Russia, China, Japan and so on. In addition, a group of newly emerging great powers also began to ascend, particularly India, Brazil, South Africa and so on, whose rise was unstoppable. But in 2001, the GDP of the US accounted for 31% of the whole world, another high point it had stepped on to since the end of World War II. The US is the world’s only superpower. Its economic power is huge; its military power unrivalled; its science, technology and innovation capabilities are number one in the world; and this determined the US’s strong desire to set up a unipolar world. We all remember that President Bush’s national security advisor Ms. Condoleezza Rice made a famous speech after entering the twenty-first century, criticizing a multipolar world, believing it to be a world that leads to conflict and confrontation, one that is unstable; a unipolar world, she said, is the best kind, the most stable kind. This was of course something that many countries at the time disapproved of. After the end of the Cold War, the contest between a unipolar and multipolar world has been the main line of international relations.

Out of the Cold War and into the twenty-first century, the US launched two wars, one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Not only did these two wars bring disaster to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, they were also seriously damaging to US national power, with Americans themselves believing that around 6 trillion dollars had been spent on the wars. In October of 2013, the US government shut down for 16 days because the debt ceiling of 16.7 trillion US dollars had already been reached; a further raising of the debt ceiling would require the approval of Congress. The Republican Party used this as an opportunity to make things difficult for President Obama, wanting him to make big concessions on his healthcare reform policy. As the world’s only superpower ran out of money, President Obama’s much anticipated tour of Asia was forced to be cancelled. If the US had not fought these two wars, it would probably have had a much easier time.

The financial crisis of 2008 showed that current global problems would be difficult to solve by relying only on the American-led G-7, and so emerged the G-20
summit. The first three G-20 summits were held very successfully, preventing the financial crisis from sliding into a great depression.

That there is a G-20 is in and of itself a sign that the world is becoming multipolar. In economy and finance, where the US hopes to maintain a unipolar world, it is already becoming more difficult for it to call the shots.

However, the US’s leading position in military, science and technology is something that other countries have not been able to catch up with so far. On October 23, 2013, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, made a phone call to President Obama, criticizing the US for tapping her mobile phone, which is said to have gone on for 10 years. Chancellor Merkel was furious and made the issue public, believing America’s actions to have invaded her privacy and that of many European citizens, which was unacceptable.

This was not the only case. Brazilian President Dima Rousseff angrily postponed her visit to the US. In fact, the US was not only tapping the phones of the leaders of Germany and Brazil, the phones of perhaps most of the world’s leaders were also being tapped. Was this a simple case of wiretapping? Why would Chancellor Merkel and President Rousseff have been so angry? This kind of incident would probably never have happened in the Cold War. Why is it that after the end of the Cold War, the US would want to wiretap the phones of the leaders of its friends and even its allies? I think that the essence of this issue still reflects the US wanting to use its technological superiority to pursue its desire for a unipolar world. The US wiretapping incident has induced the anger of the whole world. The Americans’ explanation for this has been feeble, that it was combatting terrorism. Germany has made a strong refutation of this, pointing out that they see no relationship between wiretapping Chancellor Merkel’s phone and combatting terrorism.

The wiretapping incident is one that has caught people’s attention internationally over the past year and this is a reflection of the struggle between a unipolar world and a multipolar one. The world is now in a period of transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar one. The struggle between the unipolar and multipolar world is the main line of this transitional period, which will probably continue on, albeit with some changes in its form.

The Two Main Trends

In the twentieth century, after the US had finished fighting the Vietnam War, changes gradually occurred to the main theme of the times, with the era of war and violent revolution entering an era of peace and development. This is perhaps the biggest change to have occurred in international relations. Much of the twentieth century was spent in war and revolution, with humankind experiencing two world wars and multiple revolutions, of which the costs were grave. The traumatized people pushed the main theme of the times from war and revolution to peace and development. Following the change in the main theme of the times, two main trends appeared in the world.
The first trend is that of peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation. There are two forces pushing this trend onwards. One is the interdependence brought about by globalization: human beings have never been so dependent on each other as they are now.

The second force is the common challenges that humanity faces, which have never been so serious, such as global warming, terrorism, natural disasters, drug smuggling and so on. No matter how strong a country is, it has no way of facing these serious challenges alone. Humankind has to join together before it can go on surviving. In contrast with the first trend, there still exists a trend of Cold War, opposition, conflict and resentment.

Owing to the fact that today’s world developed from the old world, there are two forces that have pushed the second trend. The first is inertia in thought: The world has changed, but people’s thinking is still stuck in the past, in the Cold War era; their thinking is behind reality, and this is something that happens often. The second force is vested interests: They are anxious to see the world in disorder, they wish to see a new war break out in the world, for opposition and conflict to break out, because the more chaotic the world becomes, and the more conflicts there are, the easier it will be for them to reap the profits.

What needs to be pointed out in particular is that following the changes in the main theme of the times, the rules of the game have changed from a zero-sum game to a positive-sum game. Zero-sum games have ruled over the world for a few thousand years, forming strong inertia. People are constantly living in inertia of thought, an inertia that has unwittingly influenced the thoughts and behaviors of people.

Owing to the above reasons, when looking at the world today, all types of events can dazzle you as there are too many things to look at. But when you look closely, it is all about the contest of two main trends. The first trend, peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation, represents brightness and the future of humanity. The second trend represents darkness and the past. The confrontation of these two forces will determine the fate of the twenty-first century for humanity. In the case of China, and the majority of countries, I think all of them support the peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation trend. Our rise benefits from this trend and our development has once again expanded this trend.

Something comforting for people was that in 2013, the first trend made some progress. A temporary agreement was reached with the Iran nuclear issue after arduous negotiation. This was something that was hard won, and despite being the first step, it still gave some hope to solving the Iran nuclear issue in the future. There is no end in sight for the Syrian civil war. Centering on the chemical weapons issue, the US once threatened the use of military force on the Assad government. Subsequently, following the joint efforts of various parties, Syria’s Assad government agreed to destroy all of the chemical weapons it possessed, avoiding US involvement and the escalation of conflict, making the people of the Middle East and of the whole world breathe a sigh of relief.

Everyone came to realize that the Syrian civil war issue could only be solved peacefully. In January 2014, the second Geneva Convention is to be held for the Syria issue. Churchill once said: “To jaw-jaw is always better than war-war.” Though
the prospects in terms of solving the Syrian issue with negotiations remain complicated and confusing, the fact that discussions are being held is something that can be regarded as progress. In 2013, despite the trends of Cold War, conflict, confrontation and resentment still stubbornly making appearances, the trend of peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation has made some progress, and this is something that we can be comforted by.

Three Centers

Looking at the global situation today, there are three centers that can be clearly seen. The 2008 financial crisis first broke out in the US, then gradually made its way to Europe, and today the center of the crisis is still in Europe. Europeans are now still fighting bitterly with the crisis and its consequences.

The second center is global partial war, with the center of confrontation, chaos and conflict in the Middle East and North Africa. This region is the most troublesome on earth, with the Syrian war being a concentrated expression of this. This region has drawn in the whole world, especially the attention of great powers in terms of their diplomacy. In the foreseeable future, the situation of the Middle East and North Africa, as the centers of global chaos, will continue on, which is most unfortunate. War and continued turmoil have given the people of this region grave suffering. The international community will also spend a large amount of manpower, material resources and money on this region to alleviate the crises.

The third center is the center of global economic growth, which shall be in Asia, particularly in East Asia. It was predicted by the International Monetary Fund that in 2013, global economic growth will be 3%, with the US at 1.6%, Europe at −0.4%, Japan at 2%, and the emerging Asian economies at 6.3%. Projected global growth for 2014 is 3.5%, with the US at 2.6%, Europe at 1%, Japan at 1.2%, and the emerging Asian economies at 6.5%.

The above data show that the center of global economic growth is still Asia, especially East Asia and South Asia. The 2008 financial crisis has already been going on for 5 years, and if the world is going to step out of the shadow of economic recession, it needs to rely on growth. Asia’s economic growth is towering over global economic growth by three percentage points. Not only does Asia need Asia’s economic growth, the whole world needs it too.

Needless to say, there are still many troubles in Asia, with Asian countries centering on fights over territory and sovereignty issues, and this is especially so for China and Japan in their contest over the Diaoyu Islands. Nevertheless, observing the situation in Asia in the global context, the following two conclusions may be drawn: One is that Asia will retain continued economic growth, as the preservation of Asia’s status as a center of economic growth is something that not only Asia needs, it is something the whole world needs too; the second conclusion is that the main countries and international communities in the world today do not want to make the
Asian region chaotic, and thus break off the momentum of Asia’s economic growth because this would not suit their fundamental interests.

I believe that when we observe Asia in a global context, we can see more clearly and will thus cherish Asia’s status as the world’s economic growth center even more. In human history, Asia led the world for more than a millennium. Up until 1820, Asia’s economic aggregate made up 56% of that in the world. Of course, we have fallen behind in recent history, but we are now catching up, and because of this, the development opportunities that Asia has today are perhaps the best it has had in a few hundred years. We Asians have every reason to grab on to this opportunity tightly, to use it well and push Asia’s rise. At the same time, we should also handle the differences we have between us properly and we should not let these differences hinder our cooperative development or Asia’s rise.

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