

Competing Compasses in the Post-Cold War Era

By Jackson Janes



*Dr. Jackson Janes,
Senior fellow at the
German Marshall Fund
and president emeritus of
the American Institute for
Contemporary German
Studies (AICGS) at Johns
Hopkins University in
Washington, D.C.*

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, transatlantic relations are entering another era, yet without a name and without much consensus about what to expect. The post-Cold War era began with a great deal of hubris on both sides of the Atlantic with labels like the “end of history,” but now it seems to be ending with more sober approaches to the next chapter of challenges to global security. What will be the description of the post post-Cold War period? Some have suggested a few: The Era of illusions, The Age of Anxiety, The Return of Realism. Whatever the name, the environment of this era will be shaped by forces we know but also don’t yet know.

Following World War II, the United States held sway over the globe as the most powerful country in the world, producing over half of the world’s GDP and possessing the only nuclear weapon capability until the Soviet Union established itself as a nuclear power. Today the US makes up less than 20 percent of global GDP, is no longer uncontested militarily, and is challenged by alternative political approaches.

After climbing out of the ashes of war, the process of rebuilding Europe took place in a divided Europe and required building bridges over both physical and psychological barriers. Today, the EU is comprised of 27 members with a total of 450 million citizens, around 15 percent of global GDP and some of the highest standards of living in the world. Yet there are serious centrifugal forces pulling at its fabric that have led to Brexit, populist blowback, economic asymmetries and political grievances, not to mention foreign policy challenges that remain unmet.

These developments have led many to question the survival of what is commonly referred to as the “West”: a model of political, economic, and social organization that had been championed as the future of a liberal global order. But that version has been challenged by other versions emerging elsewhere around the globe questioning many assumptions made in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall: the ultimate efficiency of liberal democracy, the necessity of a global market for capitalism, and the increasing need for international governance in an interdependent world. The increasing polarization within the so-called Western democracies is undermining their capacity to develop a consensus to confront new challenges.



In 2020, a century after the disaster of one world war which was to lay the foundations for another just two decades later, the temptation to draw parallels is pervasive. What did those who had just seen the worst demonstration of mass killing on the fields of Europe miss in developing tools to avoid an even worse version? Are we missing our warnings now, made manifest in the centrifugal forces of nationalism, economic disparities, fear, and hubris, which provide the opportunity for demagogues to manipulate all of it?

In contrast, we might ask what warnings were heeded after 1945 and how, in the aftermath of World War II, they enabled one part of the world to emerge with tools to forge a more lasting set of institutions, goals, and alliances designed to sustain a partially peaceful world as a model. Part of that answer was in the leadership supplied by the United States which committed itself – this time – to providing the resources to sustain those efforts, build the organizations, and enforce the rules. Another part was the commitment of partners to work together on shared goals. The Cold War was still a war, and there was a shared threat that motivated collaboration. But it was about more than avoiding war. It was about what the larger world we share might look like if we worked within a framework of common interests and aspirations.

But after 1990, while many thought that we had been successful in getting things right after over four decades of Cold War, we were quickly reminded that we should never take things for granted; history was not quite finished, and we still had a lot to learn from it. In the wake of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the return of war to the European continent in the Balkans was one of many red flags pointing at the fact that the melting of Cold War ice sheets had uncovered the fires

of nationalist entities. The brutal suppression of human rights demonstrations in the streets of Beijing in 1989 should also have reminded us that a global convergence of values was not self-evident. The turmoil in Afghanistan did not subside after Soviet troops left, but continued to simmer until it boiled over a decade later in the attacks of Al-Qaeda in Africa – and then on 9/11 in the US. Regional conflicts continued, financial insecurities erupted, inequalities deepened, and the bonds of alliances were increasingly strained. As Reinhold Niebuhr has written, “The course of history cannot be coerced in accordance with a particular conception of its end.”

As we prepare ourselves for this next era, our past milestones can assist in showing us from whence we came, but where we are headed will be dependent on the assumptions we make about our challenges and the choices we make in confronting them. In the coming decade, there will be competitive models showing how to respond to climate change, worldwide migration, the role of government and the rules of governance, and the responsibilities of citizens and nations to each other. There will also be competing visions of strategic security. That environment will involve multiple levels of power, not shaped in a bipolar or unipolar framework but in a world that is multi-dimensional in terms of interests and ideology. There will be asymmetries of influence, resources, and ambitions.

In that world, what will be the basis for stability? Looking back to 1945, the capacity and willingness to share goals was inspired by the catastrophic impact of war, the confrontation with the Soviet Union, and a shared set of political values. That was the same basis for the creation of the EU. In 1990, the hope that this shared framework would expand even further globally was symbolized by the fall of walls. Yet during the next decades, we were reminded that we are not done with the debate about the evolution of our various visions of modernity. Engaging in that debate requires inclusion of a larger scope of issues about the nature of international security and the parameters of governance we need to secure it. That has been the mandate of CISG, now part of CASSIS at the University of Bonn.

As Neil MacGregor has said, “the idea of community is to embrace not only those who share our beliefs but also who share our world. ‘Who are we’ is the greatest political question of our time.” Whatever the next era is to be called, this question will remain pivotal.