

# A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

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Arguably, a tectonic shift of sorts is under way globally as a result of actions taken in the name of the United States by the Trump administration. The president seems determined to sweep away the architecture of the Western Alliance that has been so meticulously built over the past seven decades. So far, these actions do not rise to the level of discernible policies or a coherent replacement strategy. Their consequences will nevertheless be profound and enduring; they may affect relations between all of the world's countries for generations to come. Countries of the Global South will in some ways enter uncharted territory, with all of the potentials and pitfalls implied therein.

In the name of “making America great again,” Donald Trump has withdrawn from or repudiated the Paris Climate Accord, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, initiatives the United States originally championed; abrogated the Iran nuclear deal; harshly criticized traditional allies such as Germany, France, Australia, Mexico, Canada, and Great Britain; denigrated the value of the North American Treaty Organization and the Group of Seven; exhorted countries in the European Union to pull out; demeaned non-Western countries using profane pejoratives; and launched an incipient trade war with our closest allies, based on a claim that the European Union and Canada constitute security threats to the United States.

Meanwhile, he has lavished praise on (first and foremost) Russia's Putin, ostensibly taking him at his word that he did not meddle in US elections in 2016, despite the unanimous findings to the contrary of seventeen intelligence agencies in his own government; and Turkey's Erdogan, the Philippines' Duterte, North Korea's Kim, and other “strong leaders.” Under the current administration, the United States has increased military spending and cut funds to the State Department. Bluster and belligerence have supplanted diplomacy. Many career diplomats have left the department and vacancies are being left unfilled.

From such an obvious pattern, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the United States has downgraded its commitment to the core, guiding values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Vladimir Putin seems to be reveling in the success of his efforts to undermine the Western alliance and to sow public mistrust and discord abroad, thereby eroding democratic institutions, most especially in the United States. Likewise, the consensus in China seems to be that the United States is withdrawing from its leadership role (drained by intractable quagmires such as Afghanistan and Iraq and government dysfunction and gridlock) and that the West is in steady, ineluctable decline. In their view, they are poised to inherit global leadership in time. The Belt and Road Initiative is a major signifier of this trend.

Already, global alliances are frayed and in flux and relations between China, Russia, and the United States and the countries of the Global South, have been transmogrified. For good or ill, change is here, and the countries of the world must find a new path forward in order to construct a more peaceful and just world. The challenges are enormous and the outcome is not inevitable but depends on concrete activities of everyday people working together. Many keen observers have noted that when people feel threatened they tend to band together into familiar groups (based on appeals to ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc.) resulting in a growing “tribalism.” This trend is fracturing countries around the globe.

This phenomenon has undoubtedly been exacerbated by the turmoil caused by a dramatic increase in refugees fleeing wars, violence, oppression, and natural disasters—more than sixteen million last year alone and over sixty-five million in total. I would argue that widespread conditions of stark and growing inequality are at the root of most of these problems. Tribalism, then, may be one response to this widespread, destabilized environment. However, other responses are possible and (in my opinion) preferable. Let us remove ourselves momentarily from the particulars of the formidable problems we face and reflect on our common predicament.

In the scheme of things, we—*Homo sapiens sapiens*, who are descendants of the same ancestral mother from East Africa—share space on an infinitesimally small speck of dust on the outskirts of a nondescript galaxy of stars and planets that number in the billions in a cosmos with many billions of far-flung galaxies. In the cosmic scheme of things, we arrived on this planet a few minutes ago after millions of years of sovereign dinosaurs who were finally rendered almost

extinct by an event beyond anyone's control, a large comet impacting Earth. A small fraction of these creatures survived this cataclysm and today surround us in the form of birds, crabs, sharks, sea turtles, and crocodiles. Now, humans are the chief threat to their survival.

As proud as we are of our intelligence as a species, we humans would probably fare no better than the dinosaurs in the wake of a similar catastrophe or (more likely) a disaster of our own making. A fraction of us would somehow survive, but the vast majority would perish. What would it take for us to avoid the fate of the dinosaurs? Are we truly smart enough to secure a livable future for our children and their children and their children's children over the next few cosmic minutes and hours? Or will we be undone by hubris, as foreseen in many an ancient Greek play?

I do not here plan to dwell on the many contentious issues that are currently being hotly debated and are fueling growing rancor globally: the control and distribution of resources; inequalities and injustices inflicted on one another; racism and xenophobia; ethnic, religious, and cultural differences; the refugee crisis; climate change; "othering" and the dehumanization of fellow humans with its concomitant degradation of civility; the erosion of trust in many sociopolitical institutions; exploitation, oppression, and violence; and more. Rather, I ask readers to step back and view our mutual, global plight from a more detached perspective, as if examining ourselves through the eyes of a visitor from another planet.

It would probably immediately strike an intergalactic traveler as puzzling that the planet's predominate mode of production is driven by the profit motive, which results in it catering to the least needy humans (the rich) while slighting or absolutely neglecting the most urgent needs of a much larger number of the inhabitants. It would likely seem even stranger to them that this system of production encourages ever increasing levels of consumption and production of goods, thus accelerating the pace at which the world's inhabitants exhaust their limited resources and generate pollution that vitiates the planet.

However, the supreme irony might appear to them to be the manner in which we humans choose to respond to the challenges, obstacles, problems, and threats we encounter. Marshalling scarce resources to build and procure weapons of war, the people of Earth invoke ethnicity, race, religion, or place of birth and, simultaneously, inspire fear or revulsion of others who look or live differently, so as to aggregate ourselves into hostile camps. These mystified

cosmic spectators to the pervasive acts of inhumanity that we inflict upon one another in the name of patriotism, nationalism, religion, ideology, racism, ethnic cleansing, or other such spurious rationales, might understandably—justifiably—shake their heads and consider us a primitive species.

There are, however, alternatives to our more negative and irrational forms of behavior. Societies, even those with a diverse composition, have historically fared better when their members have worked together in a spirit of mutual respect and comity. Though a great majority of people experience life at the local level, where our most visible ties are to a proximate community of family, friends, and neighbors, we cannot ignore the fact that the health and ultimate fate of our communities rest on the web of global relationships that condition life on planet Earth. Climate change, for example, is not a merely local phenomenon and cannot be addressed on a local basis alone. The threat of diseases and pandemics, the health of oceans, access to potable water and clean air, questions of war and peace, and the vitality and sustainability of our economies are all crucial issues that are dependent on the actions and efforts of peoples across the globe. A clear implication of this fact is that countries need to work collectively to resolve such potentially existential challenges. This is best done through mutually respectful and cooperative decision-making.

My conclusion is that the worthiest prescription for the survival and health of the planet is for countries and their peoples to cultivate and nourish a commitment to fundamental dispositions that include mutual respect for and understanding of others, however different they may be from ourselves; a spirit of cooperation; a sense of fairness and justice; and empathy and love for others and for the planet upon which we depend and for the other species with whom we share Earth. Rather than spending \$30–40 billion on a wall to keep out desperate people, might it make more sense from this perspective to use the funds to implement a mini-Marshall Plan for Central America to help people develop conditions conducive to families living decently? The alternative approaches, which today seem so prevalent—fragmentation of people by religion, race, ideology, ethnicity, territory, and the like—appear to me to be a cul-de-sac from which we may not return.