



Transcript

What Will the World Look Like in the Obama Era?

Lord Garden Memorial Lecture

Lord Ashdown of Norton-Sub-Hamdon, Co-President,
Chatham House

Chair: Dr Robin Niblett, Director, Chatham House

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Lord Ashdown of Norton-Sub-Hamdon:

In this speech, there will be history and poetry. And, on a slightly more prosaic level, I will also unveil for you, tongue in cheek of course, 'Ashdown's Third Law' of international relations in the post-Obama world.

Let us start with the poetry.

It comes from Rabindranath Tagore's poem 'Unity in Diversity':

*'We are all the more one, because we are many
For we have made an ample space for love in the gap where we were
sundered,
Our unlikeness reveals its breadth of beauty, with one common life,
Like mountain peaks in the morning sun.'*

We are about to enter an age in which Tagore's great statement will be one of the few signposts we have for a safe passage through dangerous times.

Three factors make the years ahead completely different from those of the last century – and some are of a nature which we have never before encountered.

The first of these factors is *not* unique. But it is not going to be any more comfortable for that.

We are on the edge of one of those periods of history when the pattern of world power changes; when the gimbals on which the established order is mounted, shift and a new order begins to emerge. And these are, almost always difficult times for the weak, tough for those whose power is waning and usually bloody for almost everyone.

Trail your hand over the side of the boat and feel the tide. Economic power is running away from the nations gathered on the shores of the Atlantic and towards those gathered around the rim of the Pacific.

This economic recession is not like any other we have recently experienced. We will not, this time, plummet down and then bounce back comfortably to

where we were before it all started. This is about something much deeper. Underneath the tectonic plates of global power are shifting. And when it is over, we in the Western nations will, relatively speaking, be weaker and those in the Eastern nations will be stronger.

The last time we saw a shift of power on this scale was when the leadership of the world passed across the Atlantic from the old powers of Europe to the emerging power of the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century. And we all remember the convulsions which followed the collapse of empires and the emergence of a new order. Only then power shifted, but the values, mostly, didn't. This time, we are experiencing not just a change of order, but a change of values too.

Now it is important to be exactly clear about what is happening here and what is not.

I am not saying that the rise of nations like China and other far Eastern powers will be smooth or comfortable for them. There are some who propose that China's ascent will follow the line of the straight line graph. Yesterday, China was here. Today, they are here. Draw a line between the two and extend it and that is where China will be at a given time in the future. I do not believe that. China's ascent to great power status will not be smooth. Beijing is trying to do something very difficult and, in a Chinese context, very dangerous too. Their economy may be largely liberalized. But, unlike India, their society is not. And my guess is as they begin to loose the bonds of their old communist structures in favour of a freer society, as they must, there will be considerable turbulence in China too – look at the increase of protest and disturbance already occurring in China and you might well conclude that this has already started. Beijing is certainly frightened by it – and they have every reason to be. Chinese history is littered with instances when this great nation, as disparate and ethnically diverse as Europe, stands at the edge of greatness and then descends into dissolution and chaos.

But – and here is the point – although this may alter the time scale and manner of China's rise, it will not, I think, change the basic fact that great power status is her most likely ultimate destination.

Nor do I agree with some of my more left-wing friends who tell me, often with ill disguised glee, that we are seeing the end of American power in the world; that the United States has passed the zenith of its glory.

I do not believe this either. You know a power which still has a claim to greatness, by its ability to change. The symptoms of decline in nations, as in humans, are scleroticism, institutional arthritis, and resistance to change. And the United States shows none of these - as the still remarkable election of Barack Obama very clearly shows. And for those who wish, then note another example: look at the lightening-fast changes brought by General Petraeus which, in a matter of only a couple of years, has changed the US Army from a great lumbering dinosaur incapable of effective action against insurgents in Iraq, into the world's most effective counter insurgency army leaving, I regret to say, the British Army now trailing some way behind. No European Army – indeed none in the world, I think – could have made such a change with such speed.

No – I do not think that we have seen the end of the American century yet. The US looks likely to be the world's most powerful nation for one or two decades to come, which is as far ahead as it is wise to make predictions.

But, though the United State's position as the world's pre-eminent power is not likely to change, the context in which she holds that position is now certain to.

We are no longer looking, as we have for more than the last half century, at a world dominated by single super power. The globe is no longer going to be mono-polar in the way it has been for the life times of most in this room.

The growth of new power centres means the emergence of a much more multi-polar world – one which will look much more like Europe in the nineteenth century. The great British Foreign Secretary, George Canning, used to refer to the five-sided balance of power in nineteenth century Europe as 'The European Areopagiticus or 'The Concert of Europe', in which he saw Britain's role as always playing to the balance in order to prevent any single power dominating and thus keeping Britain out of continental entanglements. I think the world of the next few decades will look much more like that.

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And this will have a number of rather important consequences.

One will be a rise in regional groupings – of which history may say the EU was the first albeit highly imperfect, example.

Second, and linked, will be an increase in protectionism and probably a reversal of the movement towards free trade of the last half century – with all implications that carries for a destructive period, of beggar my neighbour economic policies.

The third implication of this new pattern of world power is for us in Europe.

In such a multi-sided world the eyes of the US are likely to be just as much west across the Pacific as east across the Atlantic. The Atlantic relationship will remain a key relationship on the European side and on the American one too. But it will not have anything like the unique importance as a lynchpin for all other policies, as it has had over the last half century. I am not sure that Europe has fully realized it yet, but the US security guarantee - under which we have all sheltered since World War Two and which has given many of our European neighbours the opportunity to take a free ride on Uncle Sam for their national security - no longer exists. There are still US soldiers left in Europe, to be sure - but very few of them. And almost all are here, not for our security, but to support their operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

My guess is that Europe will be less important to every future US president, including Barack Obama, than we have been to every past one, including George W Bush.

Indeed, having loved to hate him, we Europeans may well find ourselves rather missing George Bush before too long.

Firstly, because we were able to shelter behind complaints about his unilateralism, as an excuse for not getting our own European act together. It may not be long before America's new President calls our bluff by posing us a challenge for concerted European action with the US, which we have neither the institutions nor the will for effective coordination, to respond to.

Secondly, because George Bush may well turn out to be the last US President to have had emotional ties to Europe. In the future we are likely to be judged by Washington not on the basis of history, but on a rather cooler, even brutal appraisal, of what we can deliver when it comes to pursuing our joint interests – and here the answer is not much if Afghanistan is anything to go by.

The United States is increasingly going to have interests in the world which do not always coincide with those of Europe. And Europe is going to have interests in the world which do not always coincide with Washington's. For Europeans this will mean having a rather more subtle and sophisticated foreign policy in the future, rather than simply hanging onto the apron strings of our friendly neighbourhood super power, as we have in the past. And for both of us – that is the US and Europe – it means developing a much more mature relationship, in which we can sometimes disagree without shouting betrayal every time.

It also means that if NATO is to prosper – perhaps even survive, then it will do so better to the extent that it fulfils the dream of Kissinger and Kennedy of a twin pillar NATO, where the European defence structures are coordinated enough to offer something closer to a partnership of equals, instead of the present situation of an unequal dialogue between a giant and a parliament of pigmies.

And there is a final consequence from this new situation in which we Europeans find ourselves. If we cannot in the future count on the US as our protector of last resort and friend for all circumstances, then it is also true that things are more threatening for us elsewhere too. We now have an increasingly assertive Russia, prepared to use the lever of energy, skilful at dividing and ruling, asserting the old Brezhnev doctrine of spheres of interest and backing it with military force when the opportunity arises. And beyond that we have a rising China and increasing economic power in the East.

If we do not realise that the right reaction of Europe to these new and much more difficult circumstances, is to deepen the integration of our institutions, especially when it comes to defence, foreign affairs and economic policy, then we are fools and the next few decades are going to be much more painful than they need to be for us. As Nick Clegg rightly says, the choice for us in Europe is to be stronger and safer together, or weaker and poorer apart.

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The last and arguably most important consequence of this new shape of world power is this: we are reaching the beginning of the end of perhaps six centuries of the domination of Western power, Western institutions, and Western values over world affairs. We are soon going to discover – no, we are already discovering - that, if we want to get things done, such as re-designing the world economic order, or intervening for peace, we cannot any longer just do them within the cosy Atlantic club; we are going to have to find new allies in places we would never previously have thought of. And they will probably prove less congenial and more demanding than we find it comfortable to cope with.

I suspect that Iraq and Afghanistan will be the last interventions we attempt depending on Western power alone. In future, if we cannot find wider partners for these affairs we will probably not be able to do them.

The global financial crisis has made it very plain. If we want a more ordered world at a time of great instability, we are going to have to provide a space at the top tables for nations that do not share our culture, our history, our world view or even, in many cases, our values.

This is going to be uncomfortable, even painful.

And it is going to need a new way of thinking.

And we are going to have to accept deals we would have hitherto have found completely unpalatable.

I suspect it will not be long before we look back at the deal we spurned when the Doha trade talks failed, with the nostalgia that comes with the realisation that this was an opportunity lost and the chagrin that accompanies an understanding that we are not going to get anything as good again.

The second factor which is likely to make these the times to try men's souls is that, we are seeing a double shift of power.

Power is now not just shifting laterally from West to East, it is shifting vertically too. It is migrating out of the structures of the nation state, which we

created to hold it to accountability and make it subject to regulation and the rule of law, and into the global space, where the instruments of regulation are few and the framework of law is weak.

Look at the institutions which are having difficulties at the moment – national governments, political structures, the old establishments. And note that nearly all depend on the nation state and find their range of action confined within the borders of the states to which they belong. Now look at those institutions which are growing in power and reach: the internet, the satellite broadcasters, the trans-national corporations, the international money changers and speculators, international crime, international terrorism. And note that all operate oblivious of national borders and largely beyond the reach of national regulation and the law.

Now, for the time, being unregulated and free of the constraints of law, suits the powerful. But sooner or later, lawless spaces also become attractive, not just to the builders, but to the destroyers too. That's why Al Qaeda is there, using the internet, satellite broadcasting, our systems of global mass travel and even the very systems of global finance that they are dedicated to destroying, in order to better destroy us. It is calculated that some 60% of the 4 million dollars taken to fund 9/11 actually passed through the financial networks housed in the Twin Towers.

International terrorism loves the global space precisely because it is a lawless space - as lawless as the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan.

Now there is a rule of history. Where power goes, governance must follow. And if it doesn't chaos, conflict, and turbulence are the consequences.

What makes this even more urgent – even more dangerous – is that it is not just power that has been globalized; problems have too. The uncomfortable truth which our politicians in Westminster refuse to acknowledge and our old institutions can find no way to cope with, is that there is now almost no problem which affects our citizen's wellbeing or our nation's future, which can be solved within the nation state or by its institutions alone; not our ability to protect ourselves; not our the cleanliness of our environment; not our capacity to tackle global warming; not our health; not our jobs; not our mortgages. All of these and more now depend, not on the actions of our governments, but on

their ability to work with others within a set of institutions which are global in scope and international in character.

The problem is, as the global financial crisis has shown and the issue of global warming showed before it, we have neither the institutions nor the political leadership to do this.

If one of the key phenomena of our time is the globalisation of power, then one of the key challenges of our time is to bring governance to the global space. And the extent to which we are able to do this successfully – while ensuring democratic accountability – will, in large measure determine the extent to which we will be able to manage the period of turbulence and change ahead.

By the way, I suspect that this task of bringing governance to the global space will be achieved more through treaty based institutions, such as Kyoto, the G20 and the WTO, than through a further spawning of UN based institutions – but that is a subject for a different time.

We, meanwhile, have a third factor to cope with which is now shaping this age in a way which is different in scale from anything we have ever seen before: our increasing global interdependence.

Well, of course nations have always been connected. What happens in one nation has always been of interest and importance to its neighbours and allies. That's why one of the oldest functions of government is diplomacy.

But today's interdependence is of a completely different order. Nations today are not just linked by trade, commerce, and diplomacy; they are intimately interlocked in almost every aspect of our daily lives. What happens in one can have a profound, direct and immediate consequence for what happens in another.

An outbreak of swine flu in Mexico becomes relevant to our health in Britain, mere hours later.

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The collapse of Lehman brothers in the US sets in train a domino effect across the entire global economy in days.

The revelation of 9/11 is the revelation of our time. That, even if you are the most powerful nation on earth, the consequence of ignoring what is happening in a far away country of which you know little and care less, can be death and horror one bright September day in one of your most iconic of cities.

You see, today everything is connected to everything.

Imagine for a moment, that I am not Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon, but Lord Roberts of Kandahar. He was, of course the last General to invade Afghanistan and the only one since Alexander the Great to make a success of it – not least because, like Alexander he didn't try to stay. He went in and out, in very quick and rather bloody order.

His, too was a war of vengeance – it was a punitive expedition to avenge the terrible defeat of the British Army at the 'massacre in the snows' in 1842.

The year now is 1879; the war is the Second Afghan War. And here he is, 'Bobs' Roberts, telling us how he did it.

What is he saying? He is telling us about the number of troops he had; about the performance of his Indian soldiers, the Sepoys; about the importance of his 'screw guns'; the mountain guns which were the British equivalent for knocking down Afghan villages; of the US B52s today.

Please note what he is not talking about; he is not talking about poppy fields. Not because they were not there - the poppy has been grown in Afghanistan for centuries. But in his day, the poppy simply didn't matter. Today Afghanistan's poppy fields are directly connected to crime in our inner cities.

Everything is connected to everything.

He would not have talked about a mad mullah in a cave preaching a doctrine of jihad. There were plenty of those too. But in 1879, they didn't matter either.

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Today, what Osama bin Laden says, is directly connected to what happens in that terraced house in Bolton.

Everything is connected to everything.

He wouldn't have worried about what we now call collateral damage or dead civilians. They didn't matter, for the world didn't know about them until weeks or even months later. Now the picture of that wedding party inadvertently blown apart by US high explosive is on television and computer screens around the world, a matter of minutes later. And those images really matter in the battle for public opinion which is now the critical battle which has to be won in operations such as these.

Everything is connected to everything.

And this interconnectedness applies not just to the external relations between nations. It applies to the internal organisation of nations, too.

Imagine now that we are talking about the defence of Britain forty years ago, when I was a British soldier. What would we have talked about?

We would have talked about the size of our army, our navy and our air force. We might also have talked about the strength of our allies. And that would have been it.

The enemy was outside the walls and the job of keeping them there fell exclusively to the Minister of Defence.

Now, because everything is connected to everything, the enemy is not outside; it is inside.

Now we have to talk about everything.

Defending the country is not just the job of the Ministry of Defence. It is also the job of the Ministry of Health, because, as we have seen recently, part of defending ourselves, is defending ourselves against pandemic disease.

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The Ministry of Agriculture is also involved because food security is part of our security too.

As is the Department of Trade and Industry because the lack of resilience of our internal systems is a key point of vulnerability for our enemies.

As we know, the Home Office is involved too, because the enemy are not just foreigners from another country, they can also be our own citizens whose loyalties lie with those whose beliefs are inimical to everything we stand for.

Defending Britain is no longer a job just for the Ministry of Defence. It is now a job for every Department of Government. And our ability to defend ourselves effectively depends on our ability to bring all their activities together in a networked and interlocking way.

But the problem is that our Governments are just not structured to do things in a networked and interlocking way. They are made up of vertical stove pipes, steeped in a stove piped culture and are run, in the main, by people with stove piped minds.

And there is a reason for that.

Our current Government structures took on their present form – as they did in every advanced Western democracy - in the nineteenth century. And they followed the structures which were in fashion at the time – the structures of the Industrial Revolution and the era of mass production. Strong command chains, vertical hierarchies, specialisation of tasks – you can see it all in Charlie Chaplin's film 'Modern Times'. And this was right, it was appropriate for the times. It suited the age.

But it does not suit our age. For this is the age of post industrial structures. Of flat hierarchies, of networks and networking, dedicated to bringing disparate inputs together at a single focal point, which, in the market place at least, is the satisfaction of the customer.

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The armed forces have understood this. Led by the US they have now restructured themselves to fight the networked battle using all arms to achieve what they call an Effects Based Strategy.

Some governments are also dimly beginning to realise this and have invented new language, like 'the comprehensive approach' in the hope that this will solve the problem. But mostly, in so far as the 'comprehensive approach' exists at all (it does so in theory in Whitehall) it is pretty well absent in practise on the ground where it matters.

Meanwhile government structures and cultures remain resolutely stuck in the past. Ministers are judged on how well they defend the territorial integrity of their department, preserve its budget and defend its pay roll. Senior civil servants ditto. Networking with other departments is regarded as a threat, not an opportunity. And I doubt if anyone in government, outside the Ministry of Defence, has ever heard of an 'Effects Based Strategy'. The screaming of gears we hear in Whitehall is the sound of vertical hierarchies and stove piped minds knowing that they ought to be networking, but finding it impossible to do so.

We probably need a wholesale restructuring of Government along more modern lines – but I somehow doubt this is going to happen.

So we may have to be satisfied with at least changing cultures.

Time now to unveil Ashdown's third law for the modern age.

And here it is.

In the modern age, the most important part of what you can do, is what you can do with others.

It is institution's ability, not to do, but to network, which matters most.

The key part of modern structures is not their internal order, but their external docking points.

It is not the effectiveness of the hierarchies which matters most, but the efficiency of the interconnectors.

And if you want to see the price of failing to understand that, you need look no further than Afghanistan. Here the chief reason for the fact that we are losing lies, not in the ineffectiveness of the Afghan Government who we love to blame, but in our own complete failure to have any coordinated international plan; in our inability to work together between the nations of the coalition; in our determination to see Afghanistan solely through the prism of the place in which we each happen to be fighting - the British in Helmand, the Canadians in Kandahar, the Dutch in Uruzgan, the Germans in the Panjshir valley, the US in their B52s; and in our refusal to coordinate ourselves in order to produce a single countrywide strategy which enables us to speak with a single voice and act with a single purpose. The real scandal in Afghanistan is not that our soldiers don't have the right boots, or enough helicopters. It is that they are paying with their lives because our politicians cannot or will not get their act together.

And what applies between nations in Afghanistan, applies within them too. Although there have at last been late, but welcome, improvements in the ability of the civilian peace makers and reconstructors from Dfid to interlock with the military on the ground, we are still not able to do what needs to be done – bring the re-builders in straight after the solders have finished fighting.

It does not matter if you are an army unit, or an NGO, or an aid deliverer like Dfid, or a ministry like the Foreign Office the most important part of what you can do, is not what you can do alone, but what you can do with others.

And as it is within governments, so it is between them. The age when even the most powerful can expect success if they choose to act unilaterally is over. The last great experiment in unilateralism was George W Bush's determination to abandon the multilateralism of his father and insist on the invasion of Iraq, even though America was – beyond the largely cosmetic support of a few – alone in the enterprise.

In the new multi-polar world which we entering, nations will raise the chances of success in their enterprises to the extent that they can make them multilateral and raise their chances of failure, if they are unable to do this.

There is one other completely new aspect of our new interconnected world which is worth mentioning.

From time immemorial, the means by which men (and they usually were men) organized their defence against their enemies was through collective defence – through banding together with others, in tribes, in nation states and, when these proved insufficient, in Alliances like NATO, in order to create more powerful collective defence structures than their enemies. And the more powerful these were, the more secure we were.

But one of the revelations of our time is that now, with the advent of weapons of mass destruction and because everything is connected to everything, we increasingly share a destiny with our enemy. The notion of collective security is, in many cases, having to give way to an understanding of the importance of common security too.

It was this revelation of a shared destiny and an understanding of the importance of common rather than collective security, which underpinned the nuclear arms reduction talks which took place in Geneva in the 1970s when I was a diplomat there. It is this notion that Barack Obama is seeking to reach out to in his accurate understanding that the greatest threat to us all today comes not from other nuclear powers, but from the threat of nuclear proliferation. It was the understanding, at last, that the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland were partners in a shared destiny, rather than enemies in a zero sum conflict, that laid the foundations for the Northern Irish peace process. And it is Israel and some of its Arab neighbour's failure to understand that they share a destiny with each other which is, arguably the greatest single barrier to a secure Israel, within a peaceful Middle East.

I am not saying here that we will not need collective defence. Our capacity to defend ourselves in concert with our allies will always be important.

But increasingly in the future, when we think about how to secure ourselves, we will have to think also about not just how we destroy our enemies, but how we may be able to live with them too.

This concept is not new of course.

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For, it has always been the proposition of poets, and saints, and visionaries that we should learn to live together.

The great poem of John Donne, 'No man is an island' says it all:

'Every man's death affecteth me, for I am involved in mankind. Send not to ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee'.

Gladstone said it too in 1879, when Lord Roberts was invading Afghanistan, in his great second Midlothian campaign. He said:

'Do not forget that the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan amongst the winter snows, is no less inviolate in the eye of Almighty God as can be your own. Do not forget that he who made you brothers in the same flesh and blood, bound you by the laws of mutual love. And that love is not limited to the shores of this island, but it crosses the whole surface of the earth, encompassing the greatest along with the meanest in its unmeasured scope'.

But here is the difference between their age and ours.

For Donne and for Gladstone, these were recommendations of morality. For us they are part of the equation for our survival.