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Opening Session

***Natural Assaults and European Security
in the Ecozoic Era***

Remarks of
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- We are entering an era in which the greatest threats to human security will come from the repeated “assaults” of our natural habitat: storms, floods, drought, wildfires, disease, and seismic eruptions.
- Increasing population pressures, climate volatility and public health emergencies will severely strain political institutions and social civility even within this decade---increasing the risk of upheavals and repression, inter-group violence and armed aggression.
- As these combined assaults increase, the weight of public opinion in country after country will shift from our current complacency, denial and avoidance to existential fear and even localized panic in the most impacted and vulnerable locations.
- “Stoic” resilience-in-place and “heroic” relief-after-the-fact will not be sufficient in many countries and cities to prevent *natural* disasters from becoming *social and political* disasters, as they often have in history.
- The key factor in avoiding the worst human consequences is how soon citizens and governments recognize the epic scale of what we face from an increasingly hostile habitat and undertake essential adjustments in the location and configuration of homes, communities and enterprises in the most vulnerable conditions.
- We should draw on the example of the OSCE and the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 in framing common priorities and principles of solidarity---a strategy of “sustainment”---to prevent these natural assaults from undermining human security and cooperation.

I thank the OSCE organizers of this meeting for the invitation to offer my perspective on natural disasters and human security. I am a consultant at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, which is an inspired creation of the United States government at the height of the Cold War (1984-85), and a tangible expression of America’s commitment to the peaceful prevention and resolution of deadly conflicts. I first published the ideas expressed today as a Senior Fellow at the Institute two years ago, but I speak today in my personal capacity and not as a spokesman for the Institute or the U.S. government.

Our habitat is becoming hostile to our health. We have entered an era in which the greatest threats to human security are likely to come not from aggressive governments or terrorist conspirators, but from the repeated assaults of the natural environment we depend on for survival. Despite our current preoccupation with irredentist violence in the Ukraine or ruthless terrorists in our midst, the greater dangers in the years ahead will come from the air and water around us—and even from the ground beneath our feet.

These impacts are no longer avoidable; they will not be forestalled (although they might be contained over time) by any steps we can now take to affect global warming or demographic profiles. As we move in the next few decades toward a world that is denser by two billion people and warmer by two degrees Centigrade (at a minimum), our political and security priorities must adjust to the scale of the impacts these increases will bring about. Large population changes, food and water shortages, climate volatility and public health emergencies---sometimes in ruthless combinations---will increasingly cause major societal disruptions and widespread insecurities, even in Europe and North America. These are the implications of the expert assessments issued in the last few months: from the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, as well as from major regional reviews in Europe and the United States.

Our citizens, and our political institutions, are not prepared for the likely scale of these “natural assaults”. They are especially unprepared to accept the dire prospect that these assaults on our security will only grow worse over time. We are used to dealing with natural disasters as isolated crises: episodic rather than relentless. This new era we have entered---let us call it the “ecozoic” era---presents an epic sea change (no pun intended) in the scale and frequency of these events. As that realization extends to a larger and larger proportion of our peoples, not all of us will deal fairly and peacefully with the implications.

I make these statements not to call for massive investments to change the trajectory of carbon emissions. I leave that challenge to those who understand better the economic and environmental dimensions of potential mitigation options. I make them instead as an analyst of national security and deadly conflict who is not optimistic that we will change the course we are on any time soon. I lived most of my life under the specter of the Cold War, as graduate student on Soviet-American history, congressional staffer to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Law casebook editor and corporate official in Asia and the USA. We were used to worrying in those days about existential threats. But the debates about global warming---its pace, causes, local impacts---have distracted us, particularly in the United States, from the responsibility to anticipate and protect our peoples from major threats to their health and safety---even those whose timing and trajectory may be uncertain---as long as they are severe and plausible. The key point is that climate change is just one of the factors behind a growing list of security vulnerabilities resulting from the size and location of our populations. The measured, cautious tone of most scientific assessments until recently---not to mention their strange preoccupation with conditions 100 years from now, rather than those in the next decade or even the next month---only confused the public about the urgency and degree of the risks they face.

In my view, the combined ecological, meteorological and seismic scenarios we can envision for the future of human security are even more dire---and intractable---for our safety and way of life, than those of superpower confrontation and nuclear war we confronted during the Cold War era. Now, as then, we need to think more about “the unthinkable”, and recall that our ability to survive that era was due in no small part to the seriousness with which we took even the uncertain dangers it presented. So it is to that period that we might look for guidance on current matters of security and cooperation.

Cold War Precedent?

Debates about security priorities, like all politics, are battles of metaphors and manifestoes. I was a young lawyer-in-training at the U.S Department of State in the summer of 1973. Among my brief assignments was a review of a draft document that would become, two years later, the Helsinki Final Act, which sought to set the terms for international “Security and Cooperation” in Europe. I was told at the time that Henry Kissinger---then still Nixon’s National Security Adviser, but soon to become his Secretary of State---objected to the inclusion of what was then known as “Basket Three” of the document (now called the Third Dimension of the OSCE). Kissinger thought Basket Three’s language on human rights unwisely intruded on the internal affairs of the participating states and would thereby undercut his efforts to reduce international tensions and control nuclear weapons. Kissinger thought, quite plausibly at the

time, that preventing nuclear war was more important than making what seemed to him then as useless, even hypocritical, gestures toward fundamental values.

Of course, history was to prove him wrong by demonstrating the significant political influence that Basket Three of the Final Act was to have during the largely-peaceful, mainly-democratic, resolution of the Cold War. As Kissinger later acknowledged, Basket III was “destined to play a major role in the disintegration of the Soviet satellite orbit.” The Final Act was, quite literally, a manifesto of solidarity. It became a rallying point for Polish dock workers, Czech dissidents and Russian reformers---a vehicle for enlisting sympathy and support from outsiders to their national movements for political change. Helsinki invoked fundamental values and aspirations more universal than those of any single state, including freedom of emigration and reunification of families divided by international borders, cultural exchanges, and freedom of the press. It thereby crystallized a set of standards deemed superior to the power and authority of any single state---a form of “higher power”, if you will. Appeals to these principles---reinforced by organizations actively monitoring the shortcomings of particular governments against them---helped to resolve the Cold War---for the most part, peacefully and democratically.

A New Helsinki?

Nearly forty years after Helsinki, we face not only a new set of challenges to the original principles of the Final Act, which included non-intervention by force and respect for national boundaries. We also need to extend those principles of solidarity to a new set of threats to our security and cooperation. The stresses from our environment will strain the social, political and economic fault lines that run through many of our societies. If these stressors are not to produce “eruptions” of violence, repression and armed conflict, we need to recognize their growing scale and intensity, and prepare our citizens well in advance to maintain our civility and cohesion.

The current, widespread emphasis on resilience---in infrastructure, disaster preparedness, and policy planning---is certainly essential to this process. Human beings have always depended for their security, first and foremost, on stoic self-reliance and vigilance. Where such stoic measures have proven insufficient in the face of the worst disasters, our societies have repeatedly risen to the occasion with enormous efforts of relief and recovery assistance. For all the criticism we may read of the massive relief efforts in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010 or in Southeast Asia after the Tsunami in 2004, the outpouring of support was genuine and the efforts of countless public and private agencies was truly heroic.

But the scale of what we now face as our planet grows in atmospheric heat and demographic heft promises to overwhelm, in many parts of the world, the strength of our stoic resilience and the capacity of our heroic relief efforts. As these natural assaults multiply and magnify, we will likely see casualties and migration on a scale that will simply overwhelm our current political capacity to avoid, tolerate or recover from them.

We need to apply our analytical skills to anticipating how we would deal with catastrophes of historic proportions: on a scale even greater, most likely, than the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883 or the Spanish flu of 1918—not to mention the climate anomalies of the 17th century or the Black Death of the Middle Ages. In these settings, all sense of normalcy and safety are disrupted for years or generations. We need to imagine circumstances in which shortages of food, water, medicine and other essential resources will become not just localized and temporary, but more severe and recurrent, even in some developed countries. These trends endanger not just our health and physical safety, but also our moral strength, our capacity for compassion, and our generosity. And such changes in attitudes and priorities will then endanger our sense of solidarity, both within societies and among nations-states. Some of us—individuals, groups, governments---might then turn on each other.

The 40th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act should prompt a new commitment to European and North American solidarity in the face of these new threats. It could even provide the basis---or at least a powerful example, as the first Final Act did---for similar commitments among other regional organizations. Imagine for a moment what such a new declaration might look like.

Basket One could be a common agenda for resilience---with elements not just of cross-national collaboration on infrastructure and emergency preparedness---but detailed studies of projected impacts from natural assaults that include the social and political dimensions. By conducting these jointly, under the auspices of the OSCE not just the EU, we might combat the political temptations of individual governments to downplay their severity and cost.

Basket Two could be a renewed commitment to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, with more joint planning and sharing of expertise and capacity in the worst circumstances. Undoubtedly, this section will also need to incorporate an element of triage in advance---a recognition that relief and recovery assistance is not infinite and must be allocated on the basis of sustainable recovery and responsible adjustments to prevent recurrences.

Basket Three would be the most important, and most difficult, set of principles to achieve---as indeed it was in the first Helsinki Declaration. This section would be a set of commitments to candor about our vulnerabilities, and the recognition that some situations require responsible leaders to relocate, reconfigure and even abandon completely the most exposed locations and configurations. Here the role of professional scientists and engineers will be critical in order to base difficult and controversial political decisions on the best data and analysis. Governments will need to commit that they will base their decisions about economic investments, insurance and tax subsidies, and direct assistance on realistic assessments of the risks and costs. I grew up in New Jersey, where the Jersey shore is a romantic vision of fun, sun and rock 'n roll. Rebuilding the shoreline and its landmarks after Hurricane Sandy is an article of faith in that state. But even I have to question the wisdom and sustainability of much of the reconstruction finally underway there. The same might be said of New Orleans after Katrina.

I realize, of course, that many anti-government activists will resist the implications of this Basket Three---not necessarily because they dismiss all science or question our ability to foresee potential disasters. But rather because they think it will be used to justify massive new governmental interventions, expenditures and controls. My sense, however, is that only by anticipating, preparing, planning and implementing firm policies on relocation and configuration can we avoid even more stringent and clumsy interventions down the line.

While some of this discussion no doubt goes on in Brussels or even Luxembourg, the OSCE and its member governments may not be ready for such a dramatic elevation of the economic/environmental agenda. But if our leaders are not ready today, it is just a matter of time before the pattern of natural assaults and human disasters demonstrates the necessity---and advantage---of much closer cooperation in adjusting to the new era we have entered. The alternative of inaction and avoidance will compound the impact of Mother Nature on our security.

Containing Mother Nature?

So if a new Helsinki declaration could be our manifesto for an ecozoic era, what could be our metaphor? In the United States, we routinely congratulate ourselves for the Cold War metaphor of “containment”. Thanks to George Kennan’s brilliant and timely essay, Americans have largely convinced ourselves that we had a consistent strategy during the Cold War that ultimately led us to “victory”. The reality of course, was more complicated. Containment was more of an argument reduced to a doctrine reduced to a metaphor that was often, in turn, reduced to a caricature of a metaphor. Kennan himself repeatedly

sought to correct (some might say, revise) various misperceptions of his concept. (I recommend the works of Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis for a more nuanced history of the containment metaphor and its policy implications.) But it is true that to mobilize large numbers of people around a common agenda, particularly in matters of diplomacy and security, it helps to have a simple encapsulation of what hopefully is a more sophisticated approach.

Perhaps what we need is a doctrine of containment for Mother Nature? Of course, I would not suggest that the planet is malicious or cunning in the ways that human adversaries can be. But that is, in fact, the bad news. The greater danger posed by our habitat is that its actions bear no resemblance to the age-old objectives of human enemies: glory, conquest or exploitation. For---contrary to our poetic musings and romantic mythologies---Mother Nature is not inherently benign and nurturing. If anything, she is completely indifferent, utterly heartless, and quite immune to threats or inducements, calls for negotiation and compromise, or entreaties for mercy or pity. And unlike human adversaries, Planet Earth has no pity, no patience and no incentive to bargain, much less to surrender or sue for peace.

No, I do not think that anthropomorphizing the problem is the right approach. Moreover, I realize that I am treading on sensitive ground with those whose religious convictions involve a deity that either would not allow wholesale annihilation of innocents, or would only do so as a part of some holy plan that humans must accept as our deserved fate. So I do not recommend making the earth itself our enemy.

But I also think it would be completely counter-productive to allocate the blame for our predicament, or the costs of our protection, on the basis of some theory of proportionate production of carbon emissions. The fates we confront have as much to do with a range of other causes---especially fertility, consumption and short-sighted priorities---that are not separately amenable to blame, reparation or sanction. At the very time in human history when we need to collaborate across boundaries and regions for protection and support, we should avoid arguments that only lead to divisiveness by dubious formulas or retrospective inventions. All nations need to step up their game---some more than others, to be sure---but the most important objective should be solidarity on a grand scale, not divisiveness or recrimination, in devising an agenda to sustain ourselves through this period (hopefully) of transition to something more sustainable.

Helsinki, in fact, offers a different metaphor. Perhaps we should call it a strategy of “sustainment”. At the height of Cold War confrontation, leaders arranged a carefully-prepared meeting to bridge their differences with a vision of solidarity that was, at the time, just that---a vision. It involved a recognition, by some at least, that confrontation, tension and suspicion on the basis of ideology was a recipe for war and devastation. The existential threats of the time stimulated a sense of common vulnerability that led to a conversation about common interest. The new existential threats we must now confront need a similar outcome.

Crying Wolf?

In making this argument about the dire and unprecedented demands of a new---“ecozoic”---era, I have been accused of being too dour and gloomy---of dwelling on the negative and the depressing. I find this criticism silly, even childish. I do not remember anyone during the Cold War saying that we should not consider, and plan for, those brutal contingencies that superpower competition might create---opportunistic invasion in Europe, miscalculation of intent, deranged/deluded/desperate leaders, all-out nuclear exchange---because to do so would be too pessimistic or uncomfortable. We did so because the consequences were too severe to ignore, and because these speculations often prompted steps that reduced the likelihood of disaster. Scenarios of the future should be used in that manner---as tools to promote actions that make them less likely and less damaging.

I have been compared with “Chicken Little”, who felt an acorn strike her head and ran to warn the King that “the Sky” was falling. Or with “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”---that young shepherd who warned of dangers not yet imminent and suffered the consequences when the Wolf actually showed up. Well, Chicken Little had a bad hypothesis and therefore deserves to be dismissed as an ineffective alarmist. But the Boy Who Cried Wolf was, frankly, just ahead of his time. I prefer instead to associate myself with that quintessential American alarmist, Paul Revere, who had just two scenarios to consider in warning colonists that the British troops were on the march: one, if by land; two, if by sea. There was no question that the British were indeed coming, one way or the other. Paul Revere just warned his compatriots about the direction, not the scale or the certainty of the danger. Natural assaults on an epic scale are headed our way. Whether they strike by land or sea matters less than that we prepare ourselves for either---and both.