

Expecting the Unexpected: The Challenge in Contemporary International Affairs

Leonel Fernández Reyna

Leonel Fernández Reyna is the president of the Dominican Republic. This article is adapted from his address to the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on June 22, 2011.

In the 1930s, when Jews were being persecuted in Nazi Germany, the Dominican Republic showed its best face—opening its arms and heart to Jewish refugees who sought sanctuary in our country. Many of the descendants of those refugees remained in the Dominican Republic, especially in the community that they established in Sosua. We are also very proud that the Dominican Republic was among the first states in the world to recognize the State of Israel. The Dominican government and the Dominican people believe that it is in their best interest to make whatever contribution we can, no matter how humble or modest, toward peace between Israel and Palestine—a peace that can guarantee the security, prosperity, and well-being of both nations.

Today I would like to share with you some insights into the Dominican Republic's view of world affairs, because nowadays it has become very difficult for any nation to isolate itself from what is happening in the wider world. The questions of who we are and where we stand very much depend on our worldview and on our capacity to integrate ourselves in the global community. These very prestigious institutions—the Israel Council on Foreign Relations and the World Jewish Congress, under whose auspices it operates—together constitute a most appropriate forum from which to share with you some of these ideas.

When studying history, one is always taught that there is a law of cause and consequence—and that if one studies the law of cause and consequence of historical events, one will be able to foresee future events. What we see is that history, and especially as it relates to international affairs, consists of various cycles that have had an impact on different periods of time. In the seventeenth century, we see that there was a long period of relative peace after the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia. After the Napoleonic wars came the Congress of Vienna, which did ensure peace for several decades. World War I was seen as the war to end all wars, but as we know the peace lasted barely a generation.

After World War II came the long years of the Cold War. That was because from 1945 onwards, there were two world powers—two great ideological rivals. Each had its own economic and social vision of how governments should operate and the role of government in economics and society.

That superpower rivalry lasted from 1945 until 1991, and ensured a sense of certainty about world events. No matter what happened in any part of the world, it was always interpreted and rationalized in the context of the Cold War. So, for example, in the Dominican Republic, we had a civil and military uprising in 1965. That struggle was an attempt to reinstate the government of Juan Bosch, who had been democratically elected in 1962, but was overthrown by a coup d'état barely seven months after taking office. What the Dominican people wanted was the return of constitutionality. But since we did not live in a vacuum—the Cold War was at its height—US President Lyndon Johnson ordered the American military to occupy the Dominican Republic. He believed that the Dominican Republic would become a second Cuba. That, of course, was a strategic mistake. The Dominican Republic was not on the verge of becoming a second Cuba. Quite the contrary, Dominicans aspired to become a truly democratic republic in which the will of the people as reflected in the free and fair elections held in 1962, after the end of the Trujillo regime, would be carried out. But one can understand that mistaken thinking which was a product of the the Cold War context.

In the East, using the same rationale, the Soviets first invaded and occupied Hungary in 1956 and then Czechoslovakia in 1968 to prevent the rebellious population of those countries from removing the regimes imposed by Moscow. Hungary and Czechoslovakia had been relegated to the Soviet sphere of influence and Moscow acted accordingly. We could, in fact, examine virtually every event and episode that took place during those years—whether in Guatemala in 1954, the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions, Vietnam—and in nearly all of them we would find the Cold War context. So the Cold War gave us a sense of certainty in terms of understanding and interpreting world events.

What happened after the end of the Cold War is that we entered a new period of history that scholars regard as unexpected and unpredictable. Nowadays events occur in a much less predictable manner and that creates great uncertainty in our vision for the future. What I would like to discuss today is exactly what I mean by that—how we have entered a period of the unexpected, a period of uncertainty. What I mean by “the unexpected” is that practically nobody thought—or even considered—the possibility that the Berlin Wall would fall. The Berlin Wall was an emblematic component of the Cold War, and hardly anyone thought that it would be removed the way it finally was—without any bloodshed. Next was the collapse of the so-called popular democracies in East Central Europe. Again,

hardly anyone foresaw that the regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria would fall the way they did, without the United States and the Soviet Union going to war. And finally, who would or could ever have imagined that the Soviet Union itself was going to implode? In other words, all these events happened totally unexpectedly. Almost no one prophesied that these three events would take place the way they did.

Other events that took place in subsequent years also occurred in an equally unexpected manner. Take, for example, the terrorist attacks of 9/11. No one expected them to take place. The same can be said of the global financial crisis of 2008. Practically no one was able to foresee the Arab Spring that began just a few months ago. So events that we have witnessed after the end of the Cold War have come about very unexpectedly—and a new cycle of history has begun.

We discussed the Cold War, World War I, and World War II. Different names have been used for the period in which we are living—the post-Cold War period, or the New World Order—but there is no specific name to definitively characterize it. This is a period of the unexpected—and consequently of uncertainty, because it has become much harder to foresee the future evolution of events. In previous years, we could theorize, reflect, and present various scenarios of where the world was going. Today, that has become much more difficult.

The only thing that we can identify in current affairs with certainty is the existence of global trends—characteristics that we can now point to in terms of where the world stands at this moment. One major characteristic of the post-Cold War era is globalization.

Globalization in its different dimensions is the main feature of modern times. We have economic globalization, which is also manifest in trade and finance. There is also cultural and educational globalization through the international exchange of scholars, researchers, and students. We have sports globalization; now soccer and other sports are played on a global scale and before a global audience.

The second characteristic of modern times is the digital revolution, which began in the 1990s, even though its roots can be traced back to the 1950s. Of course, in terms of civilian purposes and access, it only became meaningful with the advent of the internet. We can see the effect that the digital revolution is beginning to have in this second decade of the twenty-first century, with the use of social media in the Arab Spring but also in the various social protests that are taking place in different parts of the world. Clearly, information and communication technologies and the use of the social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), must also be seen as a major trend of the post-Cold War period.

I would say that the emergence of non-state actors is another significant development with far-reaching consequences for international relations. Before the end of the Cold War, all the important international actors were state actors. Now we see non-state actors—multinational corporations and NGOs of different types (those that work in the fields of health, culture, politics, etc.). These are new actors on the world scene with which we did not have to contend before. They represent a new factor that is beginning to shape world affairs.

Certainly, one of the most important determinants of current events is the global financial crisis. It is probably the most important, because one of the characteristics of globalization has been the “financialization” of world economics. By that we mean that finance has become the most important factor within the world economy, as opposed to agriculture, industry, tourism, or even telecommunications. The significance of finance is being felt through the emergence of different institutions, investment banks, pension funds, and insurance companies. All these new institutions have played a major role from the 1980s until today, under a philosophy of deregulation, openness, and worldwide circulation of capital. For example, only through finance can we see some US \$4 trillion per day circulating throughout the world with no supreme oversight or regulation by any government agency. The fact that every day \$4 trillion can be moved worldwide by just the click of a mouse is, in my opinion, a major—and totally unanticipated—revolution. In the past, we had a sense of money represented by banknotes and coins, but nowadays we have the credit card, and we have the click of the mouse as a way of instantaneously transferring financial resources from one place in the world to another.

The other major development of the modern era has to do with a shift of power from the East to the West. That there is a decline of the West and a rise of the East has been postulated for some time now. This would also seem to be a historical trend, as in antiquity, world power was concentrated in the Mediterranean. It then shifted over to the Atlantic, and now with the rise of China and India, and with the emerging Asian markets that are also playing a major role in world events, it is shifting to the Far East and the Pacific.

Another major trend or factor in world events has to do with democratization, which is something that began in the 1980s. Modern democratization in Latin America began in the Dominican Republic in 1978, when a transfer of government occurred through democratic means and the opposition gained power. Something like this had never taken place before in the Dominican Republic. A similar change took place in Ecuador in 1979, and then in the 1980s there was a transition to democracy in all of Latin America. Of course, democratization in Latin America was highly influenced by the democratization in Europe at the end of the 1970s. With the death of Francisco Franco there was also a transition to democracy in

Spain. With the fall of the military regime in Portugal and the fall of the dictatorship in Greece there was a transition in those countries as well. Many Latin American intellectuals and political leaders were living in Europe and were influenced by those events. When they came back to Latin America, instead of looking at politics in our region as a confrontation between what was then called Fascism versus Socialism, they saw it as dictatorships versus democracies. And so this is why we have had democracy in Latin America in the last thirty years.

For the first time in Latin American history, we have had a long period of stable democratic government. Before that, we never had stable democracies; we had stable authoritarian regimes that could remain in power for thirty or forty years, but always using repressive means to do so. Here I am reminded of what Trujillo used to say in order to sustain his dictatorial regime. In a famous speech, he recalled that the word “cemetery” is of Greek origin and that it means peace for the dead and awareness for the living. Indeed, a cemetery means peace for the dead, but it is a constant warning for the living. That threatening idea was lost on no one. It meant that one should not attempt to confront the regime, because otherwise he or she would face the peace of the dead. This was the way politics were conducted not just in the Dominican Republic but in all of Latin America.

This wave of democratization was the subject of Professor Samuel Huntington’s remarkable book, *Democracy: The Third Wave*. With what is happening in the Arab world, we might now even talk about a fourth wave of democracy. It now looks like democratic transition, free and fair elections, free access to the media, freedom of assembly, and respect for human rights have become universal principles. One day they will be respected and recognized worldwide. Thus democracy must be regarded as yet another characteristic or feature of current world events.

When we look at these trends—globalization, communication and the media, revolution, terrorism, democratization, the financialization of the economy, and the global financial crisis—we see that we are between light and darkness. It seems that we are in chaos. Nevertheless, we do not necessarily feel a sense of anxiety. That is the way history has always evolved.

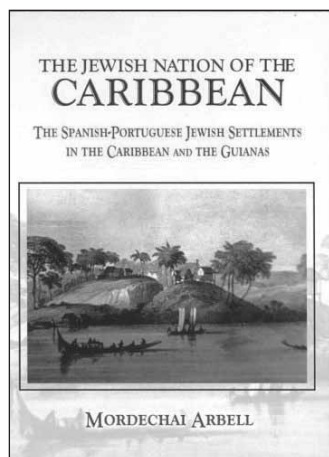
Out of darkness comes light. Out of confrontation will come a new world. And what we see at this moment is that we are going through a very disruptive period. It is what the Austrian-American economist Joseph Schumpeter called “creative destruction.” We are in the process of seeing a world that is dying but also witnessing the birth of a new world. Yet we are still in the midst of that process. The old world has not definitively died, and the new world has not definitively been born. Thus, things still look chaotic and lacking direction. But the world is moving in a certain direction, and toward a certain goal, the parameters of which

will be clearer perhaps fifty years from now. At that time, there will be a new world with sustainable energy resources and no fossil fuels. This will lead to new economic opportunities and a world that will be democratic, will respect human rights, will eradicate, or at least mitigate, poverty, and will be at peace.

I believe that well in advance of 2050, in a very short period of time in fact, we will see the world moving in that direction when we assist in, or attend as witnesses, the signing of a peace agreement between the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. When we see that peace can be reached between these two countries that are the focus of so much attention and conflict in the world, we will know that the world can live in peace, harmony, justice, and prosperity.

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