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Leaving the West behind

Former UN envoy Michael von der Schulenburg says the world has seen Western democracy and found it wanting

In your book "On Building Peace – Rescuing the Nation-state and Saving the United Nations", you explain that both the UN Charter and the atom bomb were supposed to guarantee peace. Why, in your view, is this an outdated model?

Global security and peace is no longer primarily under threat from conflicts between states but increasingly from failing states and armed non-state actors such as terrorist groups, separatist movements and transnational criminal networks. That fundamentally changes the nature of war and peace. We yet don't have a clear idea how to navigate this new set of circumstances.

The UN Charter was solely designed to prevent or end wars between states. Non-state actors were not involved. When the Charter was agreed, there weren't any internal state conflicts. Article 2 of the Charter even rules out any intervention in internal state conflicts. That is why internal state conflicts and international interventions in such conflicts currently take place largely in a legal vacuum. Syria is a sad example of this.

The atom bomb is useful to states, in that it defends them against attacks from other states. That also applies to North Korea. It's contributed to a peace based on mutual deterrence.

An atom bomb as well as other weapons of mass destruction would turn into an offensive weapon in the hands of radical non-state actors. If we snatched territory from a group such as so-called Islamic State, things could get incredibly dangerous.

You cite statistics in your book which would seem to suggest the world is relatively peaceful today compared to times past. That's certainly not the impression most of us have.

The world is today certainly not peaceful but more peaceful. There's evidence for that, as laid out by the peace researcher Joshua Goldstein in his 2011 book Winning the War on War. On average around

417,000 soldiers and civilians died because of war between 1946 and 1949. Between 2005 and 2009 this had dropped to just 53,000 deaths per year. The war in Syria may continue to skew the statistics a little but the trend holds true.

Also, since the end of the Cold War there've been virtually no wars between states anywhere in the world. The two Gulf Wars were the big exceptions, and even there, fewer people died than in earlier wars.

But the reason we don't feel like we're living in more peaceful times is probably to do with our media's obsession with "breaking news" mentality. Even the smallest conflicts are beamed into our living rooms, which fosters a disproportionate sense of fear.

You point to several reasons for the turbulence of our world today. What are the main ones?

I would say it's less about living in turbulent times, more about these being times of great uncertainty. We feel something fundamental is changing in our world but we don't know how to react. After the Cold War ended we were convinced we'd found the solution for dealing with global conflict – i.e. the triumph of liberal democracy and free-market economies over communism.

We also thought it was our right to propagate this model by offering massive financial support to its champions, and staging military interventions where people were less compliant. Western governments totally ignored large parts of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – such as the ban on using force to secure political goals – in the name of supposedly morally superior liberal values.

That's coming back to roost now. The end of global peace after the Cold War, the deterioration of nation states, the strengthening of armed non-state actors... these are all connected.

So today we're not standing, as Francis Fukuyama put it in 1992, at the end of history but at the end of an illusion. Since 2005, democracy across the world has been on the retreat. We in the West have often caused chaos and destruction by invading other territories. Our human rights record has been pretty abysmal too. So how can we condemn others for violating international law?

To create global stability, you propose making a "grand bargain" - an internationally recognised system of rules that would help solve problems between states and within states. But you also say Western governments need to be more tolerant of other ways of running a society. Are you suggesting the West should renounce its own model

of democracy, which offers the best conditions for countries to coexist peacefully?

No, it's not about more Western tolerance but about better insight from the West. We're already living in different world from the post-war era. We don't have nearly as much influence as we once did. Why do we still think we have the right to force our own political system on other peoples and cultures?

For millions of people the Western model of democracy has not in fact brought peaceful co-existence. So we shouldn't be surprised that in many parts of the world political systems are re-emerging that are based more on historical local power structures.

This is the mistake Germany is making. It's displaying the same kind of hubris as the West did after the Cold War. Carried along by its own economic successes, Germany now wants to show everyone else the way forward.

They argue with [Russian president] Putin and [Turkish president Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, they lecture [US president Donald] Trump, they tell African presidents how they should govern. They want [British prime minister] Theresa May to pay dearly for Brexit, they want to punish Jarosław Kaczyński [chair of Poland's right-wing populist Law and Justice Party] and [Hungarian prime minister Viktor] Orbán for being undemocratic, and they're paying millions to make a democrat out of corrupt [president of Ukraine Petro] Poroschenko. Germany is rediscovering its military, it's sending soldiers on more and more foreign missions, and it's already ordered German tanks to the Russian border.

Interview conducted by Reinhard Krumm.



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Michael von der Schulenburg worked for 30 years for the United Nations and for four years for the OSCE. He was amongst other the former head of the UN mission in Sierra Leone and Iraq. For both, the UN and OSCE, he has written about political development in the countries where he was

based and about "peacebuiling".