

A New New World Order: Can We Escape the Colonial Mindset?

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As a career diplomat, I served in Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Yemen and Bangladesh during the first quarter of this century. At Headquarters in The Hague, I worked amongst others as deputy head of the legal department and as deputy director for Migration. Today I am a practitioner sharing my experiences in the context of a shifting world order. I intend to answer the underlying question, “Are the conditions I experienced going to result in a new form of colonialism?”

All the countries where I have served are former colonies. Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, South Yemen and Bangladesh were ruled by the British. Belgium colonized Rwanda. In the early days of the twentieth century the British stole from India. You can still see the holes in the Taj Mahal in Agra dating to that takeover. King Leopold of Belgium regarded The Congo as his private possession so he could take all its riches and murder people who stood in his way. Read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to get a vivid picture of that era.¹ My own country, The Netherlands, stole as much as possible in Surinam and Indonesia. They justified it as morally superior behavior: “We are going to civilize the savages,” or so they claimed. That western attitude had consequences.

It is not hard to see the world order changing. It is not Europe or the US determining everything anymore. The Global South does not have to be pulled along by the wealthier nations of the north. India and China are now powerful countries. They will have an impact on us all with big armies, substantial economic power, and large manufacturing capabilities. Africa as a continent is on the rise. They are a member of the G20 since September. Alliances are evolving. It was mainly India that pushed for Africa getting into the G20. How do we respond to the pressing new global dynamics of climate change, migration, and conflicts? Will we turn to a new form of colonialism to deal with this “New World Order” or use better instruments to find solutions to global problems?

CLIMATE CHANGE

There are several key factors driving us to a New World Order. A significant one is climate change. We in the West are quick to say, Africans must do something to respond to the negative impact on our climate. That perspective has also been expressed from India and China. However, Africa has only caused 5% of today's climate issues. China and India are number one and three on the list of polluters. But their investments in measures to counter the effects are substantial. In fairness, the USA and Europe have undertaken enormous efforts to reduce negative effects on the environment. A productive dialogue and outlining solutions cannot be achieved in an "Us and Them" discussion.

At the heart of climate change is energy. The world has moved from one energy crisis to the next. The current crisis is magnified by the war in Ukraine. Large energy providers such as Saudi Arabia and Russia are global powerhouses because of their energy. The West tolerates inexcusable aggression in exchange for their oil. African countries such as Nigeria, Angola and Algeria have vast energy resources which are generating wealth for a small minority of citizens. In that way, there is a negative impact on long-term social stability. Bangladesh, a country only 1.3 times the size of Pennsylvania but with a population of 173 million people, has powered its booming economic machine with coal. Bangladesh thrives economically but suffers from polluted air and flooding.

The West now sees the global energy model as destructive to citizens of most countries and deems it unsustainable, but we lack a comprehensive solution which can accommodate development. After benefiting from two centuries of fossil fuel consumption, we cannot place excessive restrictions on developing countries while we continue with "business as usual." The solution seems daunting, but it is important to remember that the world once ran on whale oil and burning sod as primary sources of fuel. Substantial change is not only possible; it has been the norm in the past.

MIGRATION

There will be migration due to imbalanced opportunity, instability within nations, and climate change itself. As long as there are big differences between poor and rich countries, there will be differences in opportunities to create a decent life. Migration is also exacerbated by changes in climate and the effect of global warming. Floods, droughts and food shortages all contribute to the problem. Wars in Syria and Ukraine have resulted in massive movements of people.

The West, meaning the US and Europe (mainly Europe) does not know how to deal with mass migration. Migration puts pressure on housing, education, health care and other social services. However, it also helps countries with labor force problems. Europeans usually object with a set of similar statements: "The migrants are going to walk all over us. We do not have enough space. We will lose our identity. They will take over."

We in the West think that all migration is directed towards us. We are the “promised land.” But actual numbers tell a different story. There is a steady stream towards Europe, but a significant portion of the migration flow is towards the Gulf countries, Turkey, and Russia (before the war in Ukraine). When I lived in Bangladesh, I had to pass the street where the Libyan visa office was located. The sidewalks and roadway were full, so that you would have difficulty passing through it. All those people wanted to travel to Libya and work; it could be construction or nursing. The issue was opportunity and the desire to leave Bangladesh. This illustrates the assumption that Europe holds on migration, a colonial mindset that “They want to come here because we are the land of golden opportunity. They want to take over.”

Another method for dealing with migration is to “buy it off.” In Europe that resulted in “The EU – Tunisia Deal,” in which Tunisia receives 112 million Euros to curb irregular migration and over a billion dollars in other aid. Thus far (the process has just started), we see that this deal does not achieve the desired result. So far, the approach taken by Tunisia to curb migration is “Just throw them back to the desert.” Neither putting a massive amount of money into the hands of a president with strong autocratic tendencies nor mass deportations are effective solutions.

CONFLICT & PEACE

How do current conflicts affect a new world order? Or maybe, how does a new world order affect conflict? Ukraine is a clear example. Alliances are formed: the USA and EU clearly back Ukraine. The absence, however, of support from African and Asian countries is remarkable. Last year there was a vote at the UN on condemning Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine. Although only five countries voted against the resolution (Russia, Belarus, North Korea, Syria, and Nicaragua), thirty-five countries abstained from the vote, most notably India and China. The western world was clearly dismayed by the vote. This is in part because since the early days of decolonization there has been a form of loyalty towards Russia from some countries. This is still noticeable today. I was disappointed over that vote as well, but we do have to try and look at the reason why, though we may never fully understand.

I would like to speak about so-called forgotten wars as well, namely the war in Yemen and the war in Sri Lanka that ended in 2009. I was present in both countries during parts of those wars. I came to Sri Lanka in 2008 and lived through the gruesome final offensive of this civil war. There was far too little attention from the West (aside from the Norwegians, who tried to mediate between the two fighting parties). But in the end, there was hardly any support from the west. We dismissed it as an internal conflict. The war did finally end, but peace is not the result. The people from the northern part of Sri Lanka, the Tamils, continued to live in internment camps. The southern part of the country, home to the victors, claimed the entire war was a battle against terrorism. The victors, needing money, drew closer to China. That relationships resulted in money from China, specifically loans to build a deep-water harbor in

the southernmost part of the country, home to the then-president. Ultimately, the Sri Lankans could not pay back the loans and it became a contributing factor to the economic demise of the post-conflict country. Also due to this, in March 2022, the country experienced a major popular uprising. The uprising has now evolved into a movement calling for more democracy, but China maintains a significant influence.

The war in Yemen is also the result of former colonial forces. It dates back as far as the Ottoman Empire and in the South, the British Empire. North and South had been united in 1990. This unification was in part due to the backing of the Soviet Union, which wanted to eliminate British influence. Basically, it is now a proxy war. South Yemenis, in general, were not happy with the reunification. Some twenty years later than when I lived in Yemen, in 2011 and 2012, the country went through a revolution following uprisings in the Middle East and Northern Africa (Egypt and Tunisia) that are now called the Arab Spring. Pro-democracy forces rose and demanded that President Saleh step down. This he was reluctant to do. Finally, there was an internationally brokered agreement, which was, alas, not successful. The official government is helped by the Saudis (supported by the USA) and the main adversary, the Houthi movement, is backed by Iran who are again backed by the Russians. Yemen was and continues to be a ball batted between global powers. Alas, what is not apparent enough to the west is that in Yemen there are numerous tribes with their own history and ambitions. Those tribes, however, were not sufficiently part of the western consideration.

The Saudis and Russians are now growing wary of the Yemeni war and are dealing with other priorities. China did broker a détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023. Although this was the result of multiple circumstances and complicated relations, it does give some hope for peaceful resolution. Again, a lasting peace will require many Yemeni groups having a seat at the negotiating table. Only then may we have a chance for peace.

INSTRUMENTS

Looking at global conditions and the current momentum, are we destined to ride the spiral in an ever-downward direction? The answer is, of course not. We do have instruments to address this momentum. It is relevant to mention aid. It is not the answer, especially when it is administered without discussing it with the global South. We cannot pretend we know what is best for a country without collective input. But aid does help. This can be illustrated using Rwanda as an example, a proud African nation with a terrible past. The genocide that took place in 1994 will forever be a black page in history. Rwanda welcomed the aid, because they needed it. But the aid is not received without question. I will remember the case of a European NGO wanting to build a school in a specific district as an example. The

area already had enough schools. The government said no to the proposal and suggested another district. The aid organization was furious: “How dare they refuse?” Again, the colonial mindset.

My own experience illustrates how well-intended efforts are not always appropriate. The Dutch had a huge water program in Rwanda, for which millions of dollars were proposed. At a certain moment I received a telephone call from the Minister of Finance who told me that we needed to wait before proceeding until approval from Parliament was received, before such a large foreign donation was accepted. The entire embassy staff, including myself, was surprised and angry. But giving the matter more consideration, we realized that if such a donation was offered to the Netherlands, we would insist on review by parliament in the name of transparency. This review we could not deny to another country receiving our aid. The matter was eventually resolved but it remains a lesson learned. Aid can help to re-establish balance to the world, but it must be done with mutual consent of both the giver and receiver.

Is Transitional Justice an instrument to achieve more balance in the world or does it result in ending a war, only to begin a new conflict? With Transitional Justice it is important to listen to people who are affected. Imposing a totally foreign system on another country is a limited and misguided approach. Transitional Justice is an attempt to come to terms with large-scale violence. It can include criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations. Looking back to Sri Lanka as an example, after the war the government wanted their justice by clamping down on the Tamils. The West wanted to bring the president to the international criminal court in The Hague. But what did the people want? After speaking with many people in the north, it was clear, without exception, they wanted truth and reconciliation. Recognition of what had been done to them. Basically, it is a case of peace versus justice. We thought justice was the answer, but the Tamils wanted peace first. They had lived with war for nearly thirty years.

Zimbabwe, itself a former British Colony, got independence in 1980. Shortly after, internal conflicts between two parties began. President Robert Mugabe led the nation and was not prepared to give up power. Should Mugabe be removed from power by promising him immunity and a luxurious life, or should he have to pay for his misdeeds? This was the question we discussed. In Zimbabwe 2008, there were presidential elections. The main opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, appeared to be winning. We travelled across the country during and after the voting to witness the counting of ballots. The incumbency feared they would be defeated, which they clearly were. So they declared that the margins were not large enough to declare a winner. New elections were needed. This resulted in a period of extreme violence. People in the opposition party endured torture. At a certain point, the leader of the opposition party fled into the Dutch Embassy for safety. He was in fear for his life which added to the chaos. He chose to stop the suffering of his people and withdrew from the elections. That was clearly a decision to choose peace instead of justice. He would have won the election, but he wanted his people to be safe.

SOLUTIONS

Everyone's ultimate goal is peace. The question now is, what can we do to achieve it? As a diplomat I am still a believer in dialogue and negotiation. It does not always work, but if it does not work 100% of the time, it can still stall a destructive situation. Cease-fires are when people can breathe, regroup, and regain some hope. Conflicts do get resolved: Northern Ireland, Columbia, and Sierra Leone are clear examples. Think of the wall in Berlin, when that was taken down in 1989 and the two Germanys reunited; the world was full of hope. We will have such moments of hope and joy in the future, too.

You cannot speak of peace without mentioning the United Nations. The UN is designed to be the ultimate peacekeeper. Think of all the Peace missions, the blue helmets, they send out throughout the world. Does it work? Not always. But it is all we have. It is the only world government. It helps that member states often must show their true principles by voting. That shows whose side they are on. Among recent examples: why did Nicaragua side with the Russians? Why did India abstain? What about all those African nations? The answer lies in their colonial past.

The biggest problem within the UN is the Security Council. Each of the five permanent members (US, UK, China, Russia and France) have veto power. This leads to an imbalance. It is not a fair representation of the world situation. Where is Africa? India? South America? The time has come for a change. The UN is on the way to making structural changes, hopefully, in the Security Council. If that is accomplished, we can remove the old colonial ways and start moving towards real, sustainable peace.

NOTES

1. In addition to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from 1899, for a detailed historical account of the pillaging of The Congo see Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).