

# International Affairs in the New Millennium: A Futures Perspective\*

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## Introduction

*“The planet has enough to meet every human’s needs but not for every human’s greed”.* M. K. Gandhi.

Mistaken and foolish notions about “saving” the planet have become the central focus of global efforts, whereas what is urgently needed is focus on humans “saving” themselves from extinction. The planet has been around for nearly 4.5 billion years and according to estimates is likely to be around for another 6 billion. It is important to note and heed the fact that 99.9 % of all that ever existed is now “extinct” and humans as a species are not exempt.

The following is an attempt to outline the nature of the Mega Crisis, the attendant symptoms and causes in temporal scales that are “long term”, and an appeal to pause, rethink and help participate in and create a new paradigm to ensure survival going forward, provided it is not already too late.

## The MegaCrisis

The MegaCrisis, simply put can be described as the impending collapse of the planetary system inclusive of humans, due to the ideas, values and assumptions that have formed the basis for human endeavors as it relates to progress, development, the limitless power and value of human agency on the one hand, and the resultant devastation of the planet on the other. It should be pointed out that a basic fact has been overlooked, that with the exception of one external input, the Sun, the planet is a closed system with everything that is on it being

\*This essay is adapted and republished with permission from the Jindal Journal of International Affairs, Issue 1, Volume 1, October 2011

a “fixed” amount, even as humans have multiplied into the billions and continuing to grow in numbers thereby pointing to the inevitability of “exhaustion” of every resource, known and as yet unknown, due to the notion of progress and development measured in economic terms of material consumption without limits.

### **Symptoms of the MegaCrisis**

The list is long. Symptoms abound at all levels of human society and organization, from the local neighborhood, to the community, the city, the state, the nation and yes, much more obviously and profoundly at the global level. To name a few: Climate Change, Economic Collapse, The recent implosion of the Free Market System, The impending end of the Fossil Fuel Age, The threat of a Nuclear Holocaust, Extreme Poverty for more than three quarters of humanity, accompanied by paralysis on multiple fronts. A paralysis that is rooted in the conduct of international affairs via strategies that imply continued enslavement to a set of ideas but with caution and with the hope and prayer that this will somehow produce a different outcome. A strategy Einstein described as “insanity”. Examples of the paralysis are numerous.

The debates about a sustainable future for humans mired in “nationalism”, the failure to adopt Global Climate Change Protocols, or the lack of seriousness in getting to the abolition of Nuclear Weapons, economic models/paradigms of progress, growth, development based on gross summing of the value of the monetary exchange of each transaction without consideration of whether each of these transactions is a positive and negative in terms of the well-being of society as a whole. For example, the monetary value of building hospitals for dealing with diseases is “progress”, as well as jails for holding criminals, are added instead of being subtracted? Or for that matter these computations do not take into account the cost of repairing resulting tragedies of the commons in the future, or the cost of robbing future generations of their share?

Perhaps the most intractable symptom is the fact that all of the symptoms described above are being dealt with and being treated as “problems” or “root causes” in and of themselves, thus masking the need to look deeper to determine the real “root cause”. An approach that will do nothing more than ensuring the consummation of the collapse. An utter and complete absence of “critical thinking”, because arriving at the “root cause” would undermine the very foundations of the dominant paradigm. And the reluctance to look deeper is reinforced, because it would mean the beginning of the end of the “vested interests” who control the the political, cultural, and economic realms.

### **The Operant Paradigm**

The Operant Paradigm is rooted in a set of Civilizational Driving Forces that can be described in terms of the nature of the relationship between a) humans and humans, b) humans and the planet, and c) humans and higher powers. These driving forces have evolved over time and emerged through thousands of years, but have gathered momentum and dominated human affairs only over the last two millennia. The Royal Geological Society described it best as the onset of the “Anthropocene”, meaning the dawning of an “epoch” where humans dominate the planet and have altered it irreversibly and therefore, have caused an impact similar to geological

events of the past that had profound effects on the Planet including extinctions. All previous epochs had their origins in geological or other factors.

The fundamental ideas of this Operant Paradigm are as follows. It should be pointed out at the very outset that the origins of the fundamental ideas are not an outcome of reasoning or knowledge, but articles of faith and belief handed down presumably by agents and agencies of the supreme!

1. Humans are the apex of creation., divinely ordained to be in charge,
2. Humans and Nature are apart and separate from each other,
3. Nature has been given to humans to subjugate, exploit and use over the last couple of millennia and more recently,
4. Reinforced with notions of the power of human agency, human infallibility, autonomy and ability to design and create futures at will, and most important the,
5. Divinely ordained “obligation” to do so.

Along came the “scientific method”, and a newer set of ideas that progress can be linear and unlimited, and that we as humans are duty bound to pursue such progress, defined as “Scientific Humanism”. The “supreme” is in the process of being dispensed with and replaced by the crowning of “humans”. Translated into modern economic terms as “Per Capita Income, GDP, Free Markets and so on without comprehension or concern about the attendant tragedies of the commons. Additionally, at the social, cultural and economic levels, intellectual dishonesty that reinforced the above, with ideas of “free will”, and “individualism”, equality, accompanied by contempt for the “collective”, and so on. A devastating combination of ideas that are squarely responsible for the current state of affairs and what is worse, an unquestioned continuation of faith and belief in them with absolutely no inclination to examine or revise any of them.

Let us not forget the human propensity to create and rely on wrong ideas is nothing new. Our history is replete with examples. It was not long ago that humans thought the Earth was at the center of a single universe only to find out that is not so. That we are at the center of the Solar System and that the Sun revolved around the Earth, that the Earth was flat, that we were divinely created, apart from and above all other forms of life, only to find out that all we see around us has existed for billions of years before we arrived and that we are descendants of the Bonobo, sharing 98.4% of their genetic make up, that a grain of rice has more genes than we do.

## Course Correction

So what is best descriptive of the present moment is that we stand at the threshold of a plethora of planetary issues of our own making, but faced with the need to recognize and acknowledge our own insignificance and unimportance as a species and our godlike sense of “self” shattered and in ruins, calling for a thorough rethinking.

The overriding question is whether we are prepared to think in terms of a major course correction with regard to our sense of who we are and our relationships with all that is around us, or continue to operate within the current paradigm, unable to extricate ourselves from it. The prospects are not encouraging.

It seems we are evolutionarily speaking hardwired to look no farther than the current generation or at best the next, as to the implications of what we are doing, and only the capacity to “react” and change course. What may be the case however is, that this time around, we may not have the time or capacity to react, given the magnitude of the MegaCrisis about to unfold. For sure what is evident is that there is a vague unease about it all, that there is something seriously wrong. The vocabulary and the narratives being used in our discourses are no doubt shifting. Sustainability, Earth as Mother Goddess (Gaia), voluntary simplicity, Gross National Happiness as opposed to GDP, Our obligations to “future generations” etc. are bandied about, but essentially strategies, that do not dare question the central themes and ideas of the Operant Paradigm. Strategies best described as “more of the same” with lip service to the need for course correction.

### **Future as Emergence**

An important exercise that needs to be undertaken is to understand how the future actually comes about. It is not in the scope of this essay to present a detailed picture. Suffice it to point out that the Future, contrary to our belief that we create it, is actually born of emergence. An emergence that is best understood in evolutionary terms. Cultural Evolution to be exact. A process in which competing memes are selected for fitness over long periods of time. Memes inclusive of all of our ideas as inputs to a system, and the outcome as an emergence that we have no control over.

It will be important to note that, in this sense, what might seem like a spectacularly successful paradigm for nearly ten thousand years based on our ideas is what has created the outcomes that we are currently grappling with. And so the indications are clear. Our ideas over the last ten thousand years are actually wrong and on the verge of obsolescence, and actually the reasons for the disappointing and destructive results seen until now. Another way to look at this is that we are doomed to continue functioning within the Operant Paradigm if we do not stretch and extend the time frames of consideration of such phenomena.

### **Three Axes of Emergence**

A thorough overhaul is in order. As an aside, it is important to point out that for any course correction to take place, education of the billions of humans is what is now needed. Education that does not reinforce the ideas and the values of the dominant paradigm, rather, education that presents the truth as reverse of the ideas of the dominant paradigm, so as to permit informed choices and decisions.

It is important to briefly explain the concept of emergence. Simply put, emergence is the result of a complex interplay of variable on three axes.

The first Axis is the individual, at once functioning with multiple identities at various levels (individual, family, community), the second Axis is the varieties of Social, Cultural, Religious, Economic and Political systems within which we are located and the third axis is the Biological, Zoological, Geological and Atmospheric domains.

The process is one in which individuals are not random walkers but are actually active walkers by virtue of their participation, conditioned by and operating within a set of ideas and values, but the outcomes are entirely outside of their control, simply by virtue of the fact that the complexity of the interactions is too great for any

approach that would result in a desired outcome. Complicated further by the fact that such inputs and participations are provided within a framework of individuals with the autonomy to optimize self interest. The emergence has elements of: Criticalities, Tipping Points, Self-Organization, Chaos and Stasis.

The process is best illustrated by the oft-repeated example of a butterfly flapping its wings in one location causing a tornado in another distant location.

Students and theoreticians and practitioners of international affairs would do well to familiarize themselves with these ideas, if they are to be more effective in their pursuits. And to reiterate, enable a bottom up revision of ideas and norms that facilitate reasoned and informed participation by individuals within the framework of a substantially altered “Paradigm” of ideas and values is what may avert the crisis.

It is entirely likely that even such a course correction may be too little too late.

## **International Affairs: specific planetary transitions**

Specific to International Affairs, given the preceding as it relates to the importance of comprehending things in terms of evolutionary processes and timeframes, it will be useful to outline the major transitions that are occurring on the planet. Five key transitions that would not otherwise be readily apparent because of the extremely short time frames in which students of international affairs operate.

### **First, the beginning of the end of the nation state**

It should be fairly apparent that the nation state as a unit of consideration will never disappear but that its relevance for solving the major issues of our time is diminishing on an hourly basis. This conclusion will be self evident by asking a simple question: Name a single issue that is being currently debated internationally that is amenable to be solved by and within nation states? The answer is NONE. It is also fairly apparent, aggregations of supra national entities in every realm of human affairs, are being put together also on a daily basis. Entities and entreaties for Global Governance is the overarching need. It will come about sooner or later, in more and more formal ways. This is not to say that the Nation State will disappear, but what will occur is that the Nation State will decline in its dominance as the unit of identity for humans.

### **Secondly, knowledge vs. faith and belief systems**

The intersection of the accumulation of knowledge on the one hand and ideas of faith and belief systems that have been around ever since humans have existed on the planet is now approaching a criticality or a tipping out. It was pointed out earlier as to the Shattering of the myths that humans accepted and believed and now proven to be false. This process is now accelerating as a result of human mobility across the globe and globalization, and will soon create an untenable situation for the basic tenets of faith and belief systems. In this sense, this author will dare to suggest that the so called “Clash of Civilizations” or regression of societies to religious and cultural fundamentalism is actually the last phase in their respective fights for survival and will soon give way to reformations across the spectrum.. This is of course not to say that God is Dead. It is unlikely that God will be given last anytime soon, because ultimately humans will have a difficult time getting used to the idea

of the absence of meaning and purpose in their lives and will therefore need God and the idea of a life hereafter. This recourse however is likely to be contained and constrained within their personal domains.

### **Thirdly, the individual vs. the collective**

For centuries the power, influence and autonomy of the individual has steadily increased, even if at different rates in different societies and thus in a “Zero Sum” sense has eroded and in instances eliminated the power of the collective in many ways in formal structures relating to human affairs. But we are at a threshold of reconsideration of this drive to individualism. Many of the pathologies of human society, the excesses of the Economics of *Laissez Faire*, the multiple tragedies of the commons are pulling humans back to an appreciation and importance of the “collective”... a balance somewhere in the middle is what is likely to emerge.

### **Fourthly, bottom up vs. top down**

Even as the need for Global Governance is emerging in all matters of significance, the intractable and inflexible structures below, middle and bottom are beginning to be on shaky grounds. New knowledge and technologies are making it abundantly clear that humans can communicate and organize for common goals across and outside of all levels of formal governance. A powerful new force on the planet that is likely to cause upheavals in many of the areas of human affairs with utterly unpredictable outcomes. Wikileaks, the Arab Uprisings are only the beginnings of this transition and is likely to gain in its momentum toward change. It should be pointed that the danger of such run away revolutions is limited. Limited because of Group Selection, Altruism and sacrifice of self for the collective are also phenomena that are present in the evolutionary process of emergence of the future described above.

### **Fifthly, globalization**

This theme has been explored to exhaustion. But it will be worthwhile revisiting it. Globalization is prevalent in the current discourse as if it is something new. This author would like to submit that Globalization started when modern humans emerged out of Africa nearly 60-80 thousand years ago, and the process has continued. What is new of course is that globalization is reaching a tipping point.

What needs to be understood is that this is a process that cannot be designed toward desirable outcomes or that there is a moral or ethical or other value of “good” or “bad” that is assignable to it. What we are witnessing is Globalization at Warp Speed whereas it used to be at snails pace in earlier times. It will have implications in every aspect of human affairs. What might emerge, much to our chagrin, is a homogenization of all of the variables- culture, politics, religion, genetics, and over evolutionary time a “planetary imprint” but of course passing the test of “selection for fitness” and survive. There is no point or use in lamenting this outcome. It is not a question of “if” but “when” and the evidence in favor is already fairly apparent.

### **Conclusion**

As it pertains to “international affairs” and the “planetary issues” that we

as humans are facing, solutions exist and the future will emerge with or without our intervention. We would be well advised however to undertake a serious re-examination of our most passionately held ideas about ourselves and our place on this planet. “The Pale Blue Dot.” The only home we know and have. It must start with each individual making an attempt to ask and answer the simple question: WHO AM I?

It requires us to understand that all our identities at multiple levels and the complex interactions that we are part and parcel of described in this essay must be circumscribed within a supremely critical identity for ourselves. That we are first and foremost Citizens of the Planet and all other identities must take second place and not the other way around. Anything less will doom us to extinction and time is running out. That we are part and parcel of the “System” and not over and above and independent of it.

We would do well to know and understand that 99% of all that ever existed is extinct and that we are not and will not be exempted.

John Donne’s immortal verse comes to mind:

*“No Man is an Island. Entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a Clod were to be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thine own or of thy friends...Every man's death diminishes me because I am a part of mankind. So, do not send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee.”*

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