Waiting on Westlessness

Views on the Munich Security Conference

By Farah Rasmi

"Let's go."
"We can't."
"Why not?"
"We're waiting for Godot."
– *Waiting for Godot,* S. Beckett

Following the Munich Security Conference, it seems it will no longer just be Vladimir and Estragon who are waiting for Godot, but all of us.

For this year's Munich Security Conference (MSC), the organisers coined the term "Westlessness" in an attempt to describe the existential crisis Western nations seem to be facing as of late. The term represents the sense of "widespread feeling of uneasiness and restlessness" as the West's purpose in the world comes under scrutiny.

What is meant by "West" was, as often is the case, a point of contention. Having never been fully defined, yet almost always taken for granted as a broad description of what North Americans and Europeans hold as common ideals, the "West" has been falling short. What was once believed common, no longer is.

The ideas previously encompassed by the West were those of liberal democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. This multilateralism was built upon beliefs of mutual trust and benefits, and a clear aversion for the mutually assured destruction that would result from nuclear war.

Alas, in an age in which strongmen and self-avowed illiberal democracies form part of the European Union (EU), these principles have long been under threat. Globally, the main impetus for unity was the common understanding that the nations of the world are stronger together. However, today the narrative is reverting back to a rather selective and protectionist dialogue. Many of the very principles that united westerners in 1945 during the writing of the UN Charter have become a thing of the past.

The extreme nationalism that was pushed to the fringes after World War II is back on centre stage, both on a political and civilian level. Western ideals, as the MSC report posited, are being undermined from within by the idea of a long-lost better past. Yet this past is but a mirage created by incessant nostalgia for non-existent better days.

Observations on this mirage were most notable at the conference in the ways different nation-states handled the issues at hand. For instance, President Trump's administration has poised itself as the saviour of America, bringing its nation back to a greater time. Which meant that the United States' foreign policy, which has been lacking cohesion for years, has recently been extremely unpredictable, leaving its European allies shocked and often aghast at the decisions it takes (i.e., pulling out of the Paris Agreement on climate change and imposing new rules on NATO). Similarly, its position on sensitive issues such as the Iran nuclear deal, the sanctions on China and the threats often directed at Europeans for their relationships with both Russia and China (in the cases of Huawei case and Nord Stream 2), have left European policymakers divided on how to respond.

Yet, the discrepancies between the two sides of the Atlantic were most apparent after President Trump proclaimed a few days before the MSC that the EU was "really formed so they could treat [the US] badly." This was closely followed by his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's declaration that the "West is Winning!" at the Conference. Evidently, the Europeans were not sold on this and continued debating their own status with very little consensus on what comes next.

Most significant at the conference, and an ominous indicator for the international security scene, was the obvious lack of representation for the United Kingdom (UK). In light of Brexit and the commencement of the transition period, the UK's presence in an international event of this magnitude was vital in order to prove and determine its role as a security pillar in the international world.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared in his campaign that this is the era of Global Britain, but has so far done very little to elucidate what this would mean for British foreign policy or the international world for that matter.

In fact, Johnson has taken his people out of two major international conferences that are of strategic importance in international affairs. He first banned his team from going to the World Economic Forum in Davos, and then conducted a government reshuffle on the eve of the MSC which left the UK questionably absent at the event. Britain left a void and ample room for doubt and questions on where it, and its allies, are headed in the future.

As all of this took place, the rest of the world observed. The issues on the agenda were vast, but what dominated the headlines was the discord between the two sides of the Atlantic as well as the question of how to deal with the big bad wolves of the East: China and Russia.

Ultimately, in today's checkers game many of the players remain undecided on how they would like their foreign policies to proceed as the world around them slowly sizzles. Alongside these uncertainties Egypt's foreign policy remains unchanged.

Egypt, much like all big nations, continues to enhance its relations with all countries, regardless of where they stand on the major issues plaguing the West today. In fact, the discord between the giants of the West and East have always seeped into the rest of the world in various forms. The top twenty conflicts listed by the MSC report were mostly, if not all, conflicts riddled with the stench of proxy wars and *realpolitik*. Many of them happen to be in close geographical proximity to Egypt.

In a world where nation states are continuously looking inward, it would be irrational, if not irresponsible, to change how Egypt has conducted its foreign policy for years. The all too blatant *realpolitik* and lack of effective interventions on the part of the United States, the United Nations, or the EU have left the world reeling, with forcibly displaced people everywhere. Questions of war crimes, alleged genocides, and possibilities of all out wars between big states were left unanswered.

The true future in Security, however, lies in the world of Artificial Intelligence, and not in erroneous nostalgia for a better past. Although the Western world is highly aware of this, it seems to be plagued with a crippling existential crisis. Fortunately, Egypt was flagged as one of the few and main countries working towards a stronger technological and digitised future while the EU continues to bicker. If there is a consensus all nations can reach, as proven at the MSC, it is the unequivocal importance of advancing the tech and cybersecurity fields in all countries.

Alas, until the two sides of the pond decide where they stand, with each other and with the rest of the world, nothing much will change. At least, not positively.

And, while the giants bicker, we wait for Godot.