

Humanity Imperiled. The Path to Disaster or Apocalypse on a String

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What is the future likely to bring? A reasonable stance might be to try to look at the human species from the outside. So imagine that you're an extraterrestrial observer who is trying to figure out what's happening here or, for that matter, imagine you're an historian 100 years from now — assuming there are any historians 100 years from now, which is not obvious — and you're looking back at what's happening today. You'd see something quite remarkable.

For the first time in the history of the human species, we have clearly developed the capacity to destroy ourselves. That's been true since 1945. It's now being finally recognized that there are more long-term processes like environmental destruction leading in the same direction, maybe not to total destruction, but at least to the destruction of the capacity for a decent existence.

And there are other dangers like pandemics, which have to do with globalization and interaction. So there are processes underway and institutions right in place, like nuclear weapons systems, which could lead to a serious blow to, or maybe the termination of, an organized existence.

How to Destroy a Planet Without Really Trying

The question is: What are people doing about it? None of this is a secret. It's all perfectly open. In fact, you have to make an effort not to see it.

There have been a range of reactions. There are those who are trying hard to do something about these threats, and others who are acting to escalate them. If you look at who they are, this future historian or extraterrestrial observer would see something strange indeed. Trying to mitigate or overcome these threats are the least developed societies, the indigenous populations, or the remnants of them, tribal societies and first nations in Canada. They're not talking about nuclear war but environmental disaster, and they're really trying to do something about it.

In fact, all over the world — Australia, India, South America — there are battles going on, sometimes wars. In India, it's a major war over direct environmental destruction, with tribal societies trying to resist resource extraction operations that are extremely harmful locally, but also in their general consequences. In societies where indigenous populations have an influence, many are taking a strong stand. The strongest of any country with regard to global warming is in Bolivia, which has an indigenous majority and constitutional requirements that protect the “rights of nature.”

Ecuador, which also has a large indigenous population, is the only oil exporter I know of where the

government is seeking aid to help keep that oil in the ground, instead of producing and exporting it — and the ground is where it ought to be.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who died recently and was the object of mockery, insult, and hatred throughout the Western world, attended a session of the U.N. General Assembly a few years ago where he elicited all sorts of ridicule for calling George W. Bush a devil. He also gave a speech there that was quite interesting. Of course, Venezuela is a major oil producer. Oil is practically their whole gross domestic product. In that speech, he warned of the dangers of the overuse of fossil fuels and urged producer and consumer countries to get together and try to work out ways to reduce fossil fuel use. That was pretty amazing on the part of an oil producer. You know, he was part Indian, of indigenous background. Unlike the funny things he did, this aspect of his actions at the U.N. was never even reported.

So, at one extreme you have indigenous, tribal societies trying to stem the race to disaster. At the other extreme, the richest, most powerful societies in world history, like the United States and Canada, are racing full-speed ahead to destroy the environment as quickly as possible. Unlike Ecuador, and indigenous societies throughout the world, they want to extract every drop of hydrocarbons from the ground with all possible speed.

Both political parties, President Obama, the media, and the international press seem to be looking forward with great enthusiasm to what they call “a century of energy independence” for the United States. Energy independence is an almost meaningless concept, but put that aside. What they mean is: we’ll have a century in which to maximize the use of fossil fuels and contribute to destroying the world.

And that’s pretty much the case everywhere. Admittedly, when it comes to alternative energy development, Europe is doing something. Meanwhile, the United States, the richest and most powerful country in world history, is the only nation among perhaps 100 relevant ones that doesn’t have a national policy for restricting the use of fossil fuels, that doesn’t even have renewable energy targets. It’s not because the population doesn’t want it. Americans are pretty close to the international norm in their concern about global warming. It’s institutional structures that block change. Business interests don’t want it and they’re overwhelmingly powerful in determining policy, so you get a big gap between opinion and policy on lots of issues, including this one.

So that’s what the future historian — if there is one — would see. He might also read today’s scientific journals. Just about every one you open has a more dire prediction than the last.

“The Most Dangerous Moment in History”

The other issue is nuclear war. It’s been known for a long time that if there were to be a first strike by a major power, even with no retaliation, it would probably destroy civilization just because of the nuclear-winter consequences that would follow. You can read about it in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. It’s well understood. So the danger has always been a lot worse than we thought it was.

We’ve just passed the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was called “the most dangerous moment in history” by historian Arthur Schlesinger, President John F. Kennedy’s advisor. Which it was. It was a very close call, and not the only time either. In some ways, however, the worst aspect of these grim events is that the lessons haven’t been learned.

What happened in the missile crisis in October 1962 has been prettified to make it look as if acts of courage and thoughtfulness abounded. The truth is that the whole episode was almost insane. There

was a point, as the missile crisis was reaching its peak, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy offering to settle it by a public announcement of a withdrawal of Russian missiles from Cuba and U.S. missiles from Turkey. Actually, Kennedy hadn't even known that the U.S. had missiles in Turkey at the time. They were being withdrawn anyway, because they were being replaced by more lethal Polaris nuclear submarines, which were invulnerable.

So that was the offer. Kennedy and his advisors considered it — and rejected it. At the time, Kennedy himself was estimating the likelihood of nuclear war at a third to a half. So Kennedy was willing to accept a very high risk of massive destruction in order to establish the principle that we — and only we — have the right to offensive missiles beyond our borders, in fact anywhere we like, no matter what the risk to others — and to ourselves, if matters fall out of control. We have that right, but no one else does.

Kennedy did, however, accept a secret agreement to withdraw the missiles the U.S. was already withdrawing, as long as it was never made public. Khrushchev, in other words, had to openly withdraw the Russian missiles while the U.S. secretly withdrew its obsolete ones; that is, Khrushchev had to be humiliated and Kennedy had to maintain his macho image. He's greatly praised for this: courage and coolness under threat, and so on. The horror of his decisions is not even mentioned — try to find it on the record.

And to add a little more, a couple of months before the crisis blew up the United States had sent missiles with nuclear warheads to Okinawa. These were aimed at China during a period of great regional tension.

Well, who cares? We have the right to do anything we want anywhere in the world. That was one grim lesson from that era, but there were others to come.

Ten years after that, in 1973, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called a high-level nuclear alert. It was his way of warning the Russians not to interfere in the ongoing Israel-Arab war and, in particular, not to interfere after he had informed the Israelis that they could violate a ceasefire the U.S. and Russia had just agreed upon. Fortunately, nothing happened.

Ten years later, President Ronald Reagan was in office. Soon after he entered the White House, he and his advisors had the Air Force start penetrating Russian air space to try to elicit information about Russian warning systems, Operation Able Archer. Essentially, these were mock attacks. The Russians were uncertain, some high-level officials fearing that this was a step towards a real first strike. Fortunately, they didn't react, though it was a close call. And it goes on like that.

What to Make of the Iranian and North Korean Nuclear Crises

At the moment, the nuclear issue is regularly on front pages in the cases of North Korea and Iran. There are ways to deal with these ongoing crises. Maybe they wouldn't work, but at least you could try. They are, however, not even being considered, not even reported.

Take the case of Iran, which is considered in the West — not in the Arab world, not in Asia — the gravest threat to world peace. It's a Western obsession, and it's interesting to look into the reasons for it, but I'll put that aside here. Is there a way to deal with the supposed gravest threat to world peace? Actually there are quite a few. One way, a pretty sensible one, was proposed a couple of months ago at a meeting of the non-aligned countries in Tehran. In fact, they were just reiterating a proposal that's been around for decades, pressed particularly by Egypt, and has been approved by the U.N. General Assembly.

The proposal is to move toward establishing a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the region. That wouldn't be the answer to everything, but it would be a pretty significant step forward. And there were ways to proceed. Under U.N. auspices, there was to be an international conference in Finland last December to try to implement plans to move toward this. What happened?

You won't read about it in the newspapers because it wasn't reported — only in specialist journals. In early November, Iran agreed to attend the meeting. A couple of days later Obama cancelled the meeting, saying the time wasn't right. The European Parliament issued a statement calling for it to continue, as did the Arab states. Nothing resulted. So we'll move toward ever-harsher sanctions against the Iranian population — it doesn't hurt the regime — and maybe war. Who knows what will happen?

In Northeast Asia, it's the same sort of thing. North Korea may be the craziest country in the world. It's certainly a good competitor for that title. But it does make sense to try to figure out what's in the minds of people when they're acting in crazy ways. Why would they behave the way they do? Just imagine ourselves in their situation. Imagine what it meant in the Korean War years of the early 1950s for your country to be totally leveled, everything destroyed by a huge superpower, which furthermore was gloating about what it was doing. Imagine the imprint that would leave behind.

Bear in mind that the North Korean leadership is likely to have read the public military journals of this superpower at that time explaining that, since everything else in North Korea had been destroyed, the air force was sent to destroy North Korea's dams, huge dams that controlled the water supply — a war crime, by the way, for which people were hanged in Nuremberg. And these official journals were talking excitedly about how wonderful it was to see the water pouring down, digging out the valleys, and the Asians scurrying around trying to survive. The journals were exulting in what this meant to those "Asians," horrors beyond our imagination. It meant the destruction of their rice crop, which in turn meant starvation and death. How magnificent! It's not in our memory, but it's in their memory.

Let's turn to the present. There's an interesting recent history. In 1993, Israel and North Korea were moving towards an agreement in which North Korea would stop sending any missiles or military technology to the Middle East and Israel would recognize that country. President Clinton intervened and blocked it. Shortly after that, in retaliation, North Korea carried out a minor missile test. The U.S. and North Korea did then reach a framework agreement in 1994 that halted its nuclear work and was more or less honored by both sides. When George W. Bush came into office, North Korea had maybe one nuclear weapon and verifiably wasn't producing any more.

Bush immediately launched his aggressive militarism, threatening North Korea — "axis of evil" and all that — so North Korea got back to work on its nuclear program. By the time Bush left office, they had eight to 10 nuclear weapons and a missile system, another great neocon achievement. In between, other things happened. In 2005, the U.S. and North Korea actually reached an agreement in which North Korea was to end all nuclear weapons and missile development. In return, the West, but mainly the United States, was to provide a light-water reactor for its medical needs and end aggressive statements. They would then form a nonaggression pact and move toward accommodation.

It was pretty promising, but almost immediately Bush undermined it. He withdrew the offer of the light-water reactor and initiated programs to compel banks to stop handling any North Korean transactions, even perfectly legal ones. The North Koreans reacted by reviving their nuclear weapons program. And that's the way it's been going.

It's well known. You can read it in straight, mainstream American scholarship. What they say is: it's

a pretty crazy regime, but it's also following a kind of tit-for-tat policy. You make a hostile gesture and we'll respond with some crazy gesture of our own. You make an accommodating gesture and we'll reciprocate in some way.

Lately, for instance, there have been South Korean-U.S. military exercises on the Korean peninsula which, from the North's point of view, have got to look threatening. We'd think they were threatening if they were going on in Canada and aimed at us. In the course of these, the most advanced bombers in history, Stealth B-2s and B-52s, are carrying out simulated nuclear bombing attacks right on North Korea's borders.

This surely sets off alarm bells from the past. They remember that past, so they're reacting in a very aggressive, extreme way. Well, what comes to the West from all this is how crazy and how awful the North Korean leaders are. Yes, they are. But that's hardly the whole story, and this is the way the world is going.

It's not that there are no alternatives. The alternatives just aren't being taken. That's dangerous. So if you ask what the world is going to look like, it's not a pretty picture. Unless people do something about it. We always can.

Noam Chomsky

P.S.

* <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175707/>

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[Note: This piece was adapted (with the help of Noam Chomsky) from an online video interview done by the website What, which is dedicated to integrating knowledge from different fields with the aim of encouraging the balance between the individual, society, and the environment.]

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