

LAST WORD

The Global Agenda: Balancing a Three-Legged Stool

Since World War II, three global challenges have been fundamental in determining relations between nations. One that constantly pervades our media imagery focuses on East-West superpower rivalries and tensions. Another, equally powerful, entails North-North commercial linkages: efforts by OECD countries to increase their mutual trade and investments and thereby their internal economic growth. The third is North-South development. The global agenda has rested, albeit precariously, on those three legs of security, commerce and development.

Their respective proponents vie with each other for resources. 'How much should we spend on armaments?' they ask. 'How much on stimulating our own GNP and that of our OECD partners? How much on Third World Development?' Invariably, development has emerged a poor third. As a consequence, the three-legged stool, inherently stable in the physical world, has become increasingly shaky in the geopolitical one.

The OECD countries are islands of affluence in a sea of southern poverty. The developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have been plagued by a decade of economic regression, social deterioration and political instability. The 1980s has been a 'lost decade' throughout the Third world with per capita incomes falling below the levels of the 1970s and, in some cases, lower than those recorded in the darkest days of the depressed 1930s.

How to bring equilibrium into the international agenda? How to better balance the three legs of the stool? One way would be to transfer some of the resources saved by superpower detente toward international development. This not only would help to strengthen the socio-economic viability of three-quarters of the world's population, but also would be in our own self-interest in that it could increase our Third World trade and investment prospects. In the final analysis, we cannot co-exist indefinitely in a world where billions of people are, in the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.' That observation in his second inaugural address, on Jan. 20, 1937, applied only to the United States but has obvious global application today.

North Americans have been mesmerized during the past 45 years by geopolitics and economic growth. We have exalted consumerism and stood in awe of conflict resolution. These are natural reactions but should not be taken in isolation. Our Achilles heel has been a neglect of Third World development. From time to time, our consciousness is raised by powerful television clips of starving children, emaciated adults and ever-growing slums in Africa, Asia and Latin America. But quickly we turn away. We debate instead the pros and cons of closer economic linkages with the United States, Europe or the Pacific Rim. We are hypnotized by the current tumult in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and contemplate, happily, the prospect of superpower detente and declining military expenditures.

But what will we do with the dividends of detente? Instead of increasing our funding for the Canadian International Development Agency and the International Development Research Centre, we reduce them. We cut nuclear submarines and other military outlays but do not use the savings for Official Development Assistance. Our aid target as a percentage of GNP is falling rather than rising. We must realize that the global agenda during the 21st century will depend as much on the North-South dialogue as on East-West detente and North-North economic interdependence.

The third leg of our stool — the development one — must be shored up; not just by aid, important as that is, but by a new approach that combines policies of domestic structural adjustment with those of international economic co-operation. For the first time in nearly half a century, the global agenda is being radically revised in front of our very eyes. We must think afresh about the trinity of security, commerce and development. Both the U.S.-Soviet rapprochement and the reintegration of Eastern Europe merit our highest priority, as does our economic viability within the OECD community. But let us not lose sight of international development. The three-legged stool will remain wobbly until we reinvest our detente dividend and there is no better time than the present to start doing it.

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