

PROSPECTS FOR 2009

The year 2009 is already being perceived as a time when further uncertainty and volatility is likely to dominate international relations after the rollercoaster of a year that has just ended. All political efforts will remain focused on shoring up the fragile economic landscape that has been through one of its most unstable periods in contemporary history.

The historic years of eighty and twenty years ago provide us with some guidelines that can help us to anticipate developments in the year ahead. Will 2009 reflect a turn of events that led to the great depression of 1929? Will the shake out in the international system result in a sea-change of the magnitude of 1989 when the Cold War ended?

The economic and financial downturn of recent months is already having a major negative impact on productivity and ripple effect of increasing unemployment and collapse of consumer confidence. The severe downturn could become much worse if the negative psychological mood that has emerged becomes more dominant and gives way to a more protectionist attitude in the international political economy.

The G20 summit in November 2008 demonstrated the necessary multilateral strategy that is required to avoid a collapse of the international economic system in a globalised world. But it is far from certain whether such a concerted approach will avoid nation-states from ultimately adopting more of a protectionist attitude in the months to come. In the interdependent world that we live any short term gains that might be achieved from such a policy would be heavily outweighed by the disastrous consequences that would follow and lead to a major collapse of the international economic system.

2009 will also see the start of the Barack Obama Presidency in the United States. The new president comes into the White House with very high expectations and facing a very complex domestic and international agenda. Obama has however already signaled that he comprehends that nature of the task facing him by putting into place a top notch administration of experts. The choice of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State is most telling as it has the potential to equip America with two top leaders at a time when the only superpower will require all the leadership it can muster to cope with the multitude of existing challenges.

Turning to the Middle East a sense of *déjà vu* is again settling in. The escalation of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians highlights clearly that the Palestinian faction of Hamas has not been handled well by Israel, Europe or the United States in recent years. 2009 must see a call for an immediate concerted effort by the Quartet to try and achieve headway towards a permanent settlement of the conflict by creating a viable Palestinian state. The elections due to be held in the next few weeks in the West Bank and in Israel and the arrival of a new president in the White House will provide the elected leaders with a mandate to proceed with diplomatic efforts aimed at brokering a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians as stipulated in UN Resolutions 242 and 338. It is an opportunity they must seize!

Numerous other geopolitical challenges will also require all the international diplomatic attention possible to avoid a further downturn in regional relations in several parts of the world. Ensuring the non-proliferation of nuclear capabilities will continue to focus the international community on Iran, which shows no signs of changing its determination to possess nuclear technology.

Managing relations between the two nuclear states of Pakistan and India will also be a tall order particularly given the very delicate situation after the Mumbai terrorist attacks

The continuing war in Iraq will enter a new phase with the gradual withdrawal of American combat troops from this theatre of operation starting to take place. The shift in America's foreign policy strategy will see the simultaneous redeployment of troops to Afghanistan as an escalation of military activities against the Taliban is stepped up. The United States will also be seeking to engage Europe more directly in this conflict.

The United Nations will also have to concentrate its efforts on managing civil wars across Africa including the conflict in the Congo and in the Darfur region of Sudan. It is also apparent that a permanent international maritime force needs to be set up to address the growing threat of international piracy off the coast of Somalia.

In Europe the EU presidencies of the Czech Republic and Sweden will focus their political attention on Ireland's successful ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the smooth selection of a new European Parliament in June. European governments will also be concentrating on implementing the stimulus packages they have announced in an attempt to revive growth in European economies.

Turning to the Euro-Mediterranean region the successful outcome of French President Nikolas Sarkozy's Union for the Mediterranean initiative provides us with a very dynamic agenda. The creation of a Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat in Barcelona will see the long overdue process of institutionalizing Euro-Med relations start to take place. The project driven nature of the Union for the Mediterranean in key strategic areas will help to start improving living standards of millions of people across the Mediterranean region.

The year 2009 is therefore certain to be a very challenging year, a year that calls for true leadership on a global stage. Twenty years since the end of the Cold War the post-Cold War contours are becoming more and more clear as the rise of China, India and other powers becomes more obvious and the relative decline of America more apparent. Turbulence in the economic sector and chaos in the political sector are signs of a changing world order where the west is surrendering centuries of economic and political hegemony. 2009 will witness a further ushering in of a globalization process where weakened nation states and international organizations are seeking to find their place in the emerging multipolar system by addressing the multitude of challenges they are facing.

Professor **Stephen Calleya**, International Relations Analyst, extends his very best wishes for the New Year to all visitors of his website.