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THE STATE OF THE WORLD:

“Our problems are man-made, therefore they can be solved by man” (JFK)

“We observe today not a victory of a party, but a celebration of freedom, symbolizing an end as well as a beginning, signifying renewal as well as change”. With these words President John Fitzgerald Kennedy began his Inauguration Address in a spring morning of 1961. The state of the world he was about to lead at that time looked very different to that of today, but some guiding principles still remain the same.

JFK took the responsibility of governing a country whose foreign policy dealt with very deep challenges. In different political scenarios he neighbored allies committed to sacrificing some values in exchange for security. He had the task of facing great difficulties and opportunities alike, be they human rights in his own country, Vietnam or the Soviet military build-up in Cuba. He was also committed to inspiring future generations in the enormous job of taking care of the present in order to improve the future.



Since the 1960's we have seen an astonishing amount of changes, from political ideologies to daily technology, from personal leisure to social relations. JFK led the so-called “western hemisphere”, which in the end prevailed over Communist influence, in the outcome of the Cold War. This tension brought about a generation of leaders and citizens who had to live with many burdens. From Vladivostok to Rabat, from Anchorage to Saigon, many opportunities of progress were sacrificed in order to be in one of the two sides, and in order to defeat the other. Some countries were pulled into this competition by supreme powers that forced them to “protect” themselves against the enemy. Currently our world is still a world of enemies, but also a world of growing prosperity, inspiring moves and disappointing mistakes. All three concepts come and go in cycles, as history unfolds.

Many consider that the best way to approach a problem is to get a wider perspective; it is often not advisable to dive into a problem, forgetting the context and the influences, but it is preferable to stand back and view the matter objectively, thereby considering the wider implications and providing the observer with clarity of information and understanding that would otherwise be overlooked”. In the continuous human attempt to analyze reality history plays a supreme role. In history there lie many lessons from which one can learn, lessons that may prevent the present from repeating tragic events of the past, and it is thanks to history that Mankind projects its best achievements into the future. History is the best source of advice and our present is nothing but a part of it, the page that is to be written today. Nevertheless, the lessons are too often forgotten, and too often the mistakes sound familiar.

The Cold War came to an end and in many countries political trends and economic interests started a period of renaissance. The United States saw two decades of supremacy, and in Europe the “peace dividend” delivered social benefits, also helping Germany reunify. The disappearance of the two blocks created a vacuum of political influence that turned into nationalisms in some cases. Now, twenty years later, new influences have developed, new leaders have inspired and new slaughter has

occurred. Man holds the power to abolish all forms of life, and many forms of death. Poverty is a growing concern for many countries, as much as climate change. But the core values that guide most governments remain close to those JFK had to deal with. Whenever an administration has to invest in the future its high politics are foreign policy, strategic engagements, resources and the growing power of the media. These are the fields that normally lead politics, but is there room for compromise, for human dignity and for common ground at a global scale? In an attempt by leaders to answer this question the 20th century saw an enormous debate between realism and idealism, two different conceptions of world politics.

Politics:

Policies ought not to serve politics, but to be used by politics to serve the citizen. In 2010 the state of the world still sees a range of dictatorships, failed states and areas in conflict such as the Middle East. The influence of politics is crucial in almost everything we see, and in politics the length of terms and electoral influence is paramount. There is a continuous fight between the short perspective of an administration's mandate and the long-term schedule of the national interests it has to defend.



Almost fifty years after JFK's victory, another man, named Barack Hussein Obama, has a say in the state of the world. His generation of politicians grew up in a prosperity never known in the days of Kennedy and Khrushchev. Not a widespread material prosperity of course, for many still die of hunger, but a feeling that the will of a few can help improve the future of many. The memories of World War II and the Cold War no longer justify the need for transatlantic supremacy: in 2010 new threats exist, new tools are to be used and new strong players are on the table.

Players:

In the 19th century Central Asia and the Middle East became the stage of a "Great Game". In this fight Great Britain played its part in a competition against Russia in order to secure access to India. Other European actors joined the game, like France, and it became a confrontation of suspiciousness, spheres of influence and misunderstandings, involving military alliances, espionage and field officers like Thomas Edward Lawrence. The final result of this endeavour and the outcome of World War I affected the Ottoman Empire, resulting in a new political landscape in the region, as it was imposed in Versailles. New borders were drawn and new regimes were established. The Great Game is over now, but its effects are vivid in our headlines a century later, in Europe, in Asia, and elsewhere.

Europe is very far from the source of trouble and instability it used to be in the times of the "Great Game". Versailles also affected the European soul, not achieving sincere peace, and allowing nationalisms to unleash the second global bloodshed in the 1940's. After peace was signed by the Allies, who were to become the rulers of the United Nations, Europe saw other phases of its cold war go by: antagonism, containment and detente. Peaceful coexistence seemed the most placid of all fears. And all covered by an arms race that seemed to have no end.



Fortunately, there was an end and the “iron curtain” fell down. A fruitful period of time followed, with a generation of leaders like Mitterrand, Kohl or Gonzalez, who had deep values learned with bitter experience. After two decades of stable growth and great development, the European Union is in a new dawn now, reinventing its methods and strength with the Treaty of Lisbon and the new European External Action Service. The EU is no longer the exclusive power to deal with the US in world politics. Besides, its member states face new social issues such as ageing populations or human migrations. These realities defy the future of one of the greatest European achievements, the Welfare State. The external action of the EU has been backed by the Common Security and Defence Policy for a long time, proving to be a success in areas like the Somali Basin, the Balkans or Chad. With this ever stronger personality and “united in diversity”, Europe is a source of stability upon which other regions of the world rely. However it needs to update some of its structures and policies to achieve greater competitiveness and face demographic issues.

East of the Urals, the shy Asian sunrise belongs to the past, and nowadays this continent holds the most promising changes. From China to India, from Japan to Kazakhstan, new and stronger players are more and more influential. Natural resources, double-digit economic growth and human rights are issues of concern and tools for expansion in this region of the world. However, political turmoil and blind violence in some countries defy the stability of the state of the world, and in the last decade the Middle East has seen a lot of action aiming at building lasting peace.

In between these lies Russia, the old power that has regained prestige and wants a bigger say in world politics. Russia’s influence is enormous in Europe and the Middle East, not to mention in Central Asia and its energy policies. Its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council and its geography determine that half the world has to deal with Russia to either resolve dispute or build cooperation. And regarding future engagements, it has to be noted that new fields of development and investigation lie off its northern coasts, in the Arctic, where coming years will see growing scientific, commercial and military activity.



For the first time in the last two centuries, the United States is looking west. Europe is no longer the central arena of global politics and the economic interdependence with China forces the US to manage many important issues with Asia. The Pacific Ocean is turning into a rising field of both competition and partnership, as seen in the Copenhagen Summit on climate change and in the Toronto G-20 Summit. However, the US still leads the world in many areas, and is doing its utmost to keep its influence. A new administration is already delivering policies, and the economic crisis is its biggest concern so far. The way this crisis is dealt with will determine how the future financial and economic governance will work. The goal is larger global coordination, but Keynesian and liberal tendencies still persist. The ambitions of some to increase growth and GDP counter the efforts made by others to reduce deficit and avoid inflation. As usual the best course of action will be at a middle-ground, arising out of positions of agreement, based on foundations that are sincerely built. But international consensus is more difficult to achieve now that rising powers demand more influence and fairer status in the United Nations. In

order to renew these governance structures the international community has launched a debate on UN reform, a change aimed at adapting its ability to respond to current problems and deliver efficient policies. In this process, again, the US has a leading position, a position that requires commitment, compromise and bridge-building.

Africa and Latin America often see how populism or corruption play too big a role in their lives, staining efforts and potential progress. In South America Brazil's leadership represents a hope, but drug-trafficking along with its social disgrace leave countries like Colombia or Mexico way behind their possibilities. In Africa many governments struggle against corrupt practices that plunge millions of people into a permanent lack of possibilities. But not all do try, making it more difficult for other governments to rely their aid resources on corrupt administrations. This aid is a must on the part of the countries that have a big GDP to support it. Africa has too many times been forgotten in world politics, and the 21st century must be one of cooperation and development. The way this aid is launched and controlled remains a concern. The World Trade Organization and the World Monetary Fund are key actors in this effort, and their guidelines will determine whether the "South" is left behind again or not. The possibilities when the Doha Round concludes seem rather positive for African development, and both the EU and the US have renegotiated their trade agreements with Latin America in the last year. Seeking progress and common interest at once in these regions is not easy, for trade agreements normally bring both prosperity and disruptions. The stakes are high, but the international community is expected to deliver. Human values deserve it.

Values:

History dictates values. They are the result of a generation's experience and they depend upon geography, amongst other things. Values also configure the changing state of the world, and the values of a society need to be inspired and renewed from time to time. Marie Curie, a scientist who delivered great progress for Mankind, once said "nothing in life is to be feared; it is only to be understood". Maybe in this quote lies the truth for global knowledge and brotherhood.

JFK, the young British coalition formed by David Cameron and Nick Clegg, the recently elected Polish President Komorowski, or President Obama, all represent examples of the evolution of a country's personality and values. However, are these values growing apart in the absence of global confrontation? This is a key question. Most people in today's society were born after World War II, and many know nothing about the Cold War values. The interrelation between people is deeper and cultures know one another far better than before. But they also collide, more rapidly than ever. We see how the old confrontation between East and West has turned into one between North and South. Therefore, more has to be done to embrace dialogue and peace, even though extremists try to influence moderates in many countries.



In 1994 Samuel Huntington launched his theory on "The Clash of Civilizations". He described what he thought was a value-rooted conflict between the West and Islam. His theories have been proved partially wrong and two important initiatives have seen the light in the last years to seek a deeper approach between North and South. First, the Alliance of Civilizations, inspired by Spain and Turkey, has so far developed into a rather promising project, with the caveat of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Secondly, the Union for the Mediterranean, a partnership between the European Union and the countries of the southern shore of the "Mare Nostrum" also tries to inspire common values and projects to develop a new relationship between the two sides. The city of Barcelona has been chosen to host the General-Secretariat of this Mediterranean institution. Spain has always been a crossroads of values and cultures, and such initiatives foster its heritage and honour a history that shows how both North and

South shaped its present.

When it comes to world peace, other positions of global agreement have been reached in recent time. Nuclear proliferation is under control of the US and Russia, and these two countries seem open to cooperation in limiting their arsenals and in implementing binding rules before the international community. North Korea and Iran are suspected to alter this weak balance, and Russia and China will determine the final outcome of negotiations, together with the US. With regard to Huntington's clash and the ways to avoid it, in 2009 Cairo University was the setting of the most promising approach to Islam by the West, represented by President Obama.

Expectations normally rise too high, problems cannot be solved all of a sudden, speeches do not bring actions along immediately, but some hopeful movements have been on the agenda. Many players, many values and many efforts have been put in motion in order to find solutions to the central conflict constantly threatening world peace, namely that of Israel and Palestine. The clash of religions is not a valid concept, the real clash takes place among extremists, who are often backed by economic and political interests in the region. And too often these extremists from all sides have showed their will to absorb moderates. The international community has often negotiated peace plans, but these are sometimes boycotted by either Hamas' blind actions or Israel's settlements and defence policies. Suspicious relationships need to be controlled, such as that of Iran and Hizbullah and the one putting Lebanon under Syrian influence.

In order to reach long-term stability Egypt and Turkey have to speak their minds with a strong and committed voice, building bridges with Israel and leading the Arab League into positions of consensus. Israel too has to engage this vital issue with openness and frankness, avoiding painful memories that may end up torpedoing a possible peace process. The future can never be built only by drawing from a past that for sure would slow down evolution. Therefore, all parts need to embrace positions of ambition, pursuing the building of common ground for shared prosperity.

International diplomacy has to increase efforts in the Middle East as well, pursuing mutual confidence, and never leaving the region apart due to other short-term influences. This is a long-term endeavour and support must be given to it with persistence. The European Union, under the leadership of Javier Solana, has played an extremely fruitful role of mediation in recent years, and such example should be followed by others. Religion too has to engage, with Shi'ite and Sunni leaders shouldering the burden of a future sincere peace process. Positions of agreement are too easily vulnerable, even by trade interests, and the political and religious turmoil in Iraq and Afghanistan does not help. How to find both realistic and optimistic inspiration for such a difficult global problem?



Again, when looking back, positive advice can be found: four years after his brother's death and exactly two months before his own, Robert Francis Kennedy, "Bobby", delivered his famous speech "On the mindless menace of violence". In a context of civil rights conflict he said: "What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by an assassin's bullet... Our life on this planet is too short and the work to be done is too great..." Maybe the root of the solution is to regard such issues not as problems of our time, but instead as problems of the whole Mankind. From such generous position could men and women of all condition, nationality and belief, come together in the pursuit of a better future for their children.

The challenge:

A few words may help explain the size of the challenge that lies ahead: the economic, social and political reality in a single country is rather complex nowadays, more defying than it has ever been, requiring big doses of wisdom and agile vision on the part of all available assets, be they engineers, economists, politicians or infrastructures. If we look at the complexity and immensity of the world the challenge seems unreachable, unachievable.

In his famous speech at the American University, JFK also talked about a challenge. He fostered the building of sincere peace in the world. It also seemed an unachievable peace, but the 21st century seems to be closer to success. “I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on Earth worth living. Not peace in our time, but peace in all time”. Idealism is often opposed to reality, but the bigger the effort, the bigger the hopes. Current generations deserve trying and future generations demand it: they will inherit our achievements, they will regret our mistakes, they will read the page we are writing today, in their struggle to improve, even a little, the future state of the world.