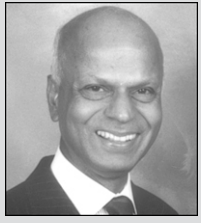


Why Davos is still useful



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

DAVOS is a small German-speaking mountain town, situated more than 1500m above the sea level, in the eastern part of Switzerland, where Thomas Mann wrote his famous novel *The Magic Mountain*. It has long been considered as one of the world's finest ski resorts. But its recent reputation is due not so much to its winter sports facilities, nor to its bracing air but to its being the venue for the annual meetings of an institution called the World Economic Forum. The WEF is the brainchild of a clever impresario called Klaus Schwab. It is considered as the world's biggest informal think tank by its supporters and as the largest gabfest by its detractors.

Does the World Economic Forum represent the world? Clearly, the answer is "no." A look at the list of speakers, participants and moderators demonstrates that at least 75 per cent of them come from the Western industrialised world. Although this year, there were a number of participants from South Africa (President Mbeki), Brazil (President Lula da Silva), China and India, the continents of Asia, Africa and South America were not adequately represented. As pointed out by Philip Bowring, WEF's "composition does not reflect the political, commercial, industrial or intellectual worlds of the present, let alone the future. Indeed critics would argue that the composition reflects the arrogance and complacency of the West in the face of its rapid relative decline." So, who attends the Davos forum?

Well, by and large, the narcissistic "Davos man" (expression coined by Samuel Huntington) represents either the rich, (the barons of Western capitalism), the powerful (the politicians), or global capitalism's agents like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-

LETTER FROM EUROPE

The world may not respect the United States (or at least its current war-mongering government), but it certainly fears its overwhelming power and "its disdain for multilateral institutions" like the United Nations. So, the world needs informal networking opportunities where the world (or at least an important part of the world like Europe) can engage the United States in informal discussions on "tough issues." The WEF in Davos, despite some shortcomings, does provide such an opportunity.

operation and Development, and the World Trade Organisation. True, the WEF is not a charity. Only the organisations which are prepared to spend hefty sums of money to participate, are allowed to do so. Many Asian and African governments and organisations are unable or unwilling to spend so much money to attend a conference which from their perspective is dominated by Western interests. If that is so, what about the forum itself? Does it try to provide alternative perspectives on current issues or give only the Western perspective on them? The answer, unfortunately is not an encouraging one. Let us just look at one example. In the words of Philip Bowring, "Despite much talk of the West needing to understand Islam and to develop inter-faith dialogues, it appears bogged down in the assumption that the extremist versions of religion that Islam has spawned are representative." The forum's description of Islam and the world's 1.5 billion Muslims in its "Guide to the Issues" are full of prejudices and simplistic generalisations.

The first World Economic Forum was held in 1971, essentially as a management seminar. Since then, the scope of the conference has been expanded to cover wider areas of human interest. Now the forum has become an informal networking venue for the participants "to search for multilateral solutions to emerging world problems" with the hope that their message will influence public opinion and government agendas all over the world.

This year, the theme was "Taking Responsibility for Tough Choices." Fight against poverty in Africa, climate change, America's global dominance, China's runaway growth, falling dollar and America's fiscal and current-account deficits, and the political role of Islam figured among the issues for discussion.

Africa occupied the centre stage in this year's conference. Clinton, Chirac, Blair, and a host of other speakers put forward their ideas on how to reduce poverty in Africa and elsewhere. Prof. Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University, who is in charge of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, spoke passionately about measures to cut in half the number of poor people in the world within ten years. In his forthcoming book *The End of Poverty* he envisions a world without poverty by 2025. How can this be achieved? According to Prof. Sachs, an increase in development aid will go a long way in achieving this goal. In his opinion, the industrialised nations should fulfil their previous commitments to give 0.7 per cent of their GDP to aid. At present, the wealthiest nations give less than 0.3 per cent of their GDP to aid. Clinton admitted that "we have never created an effective political constituency" in the United States to make people aware of the need to increase development aid to Africa. The British team put forward an idea developed by Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to create a new financial instrument called International Finance Facility "to tap an extra \$50 billion in development aid around the world by raising money in advance on global financial markets." As part of Britain's drive to make African poverty relief as effective as the Marshall Plan for Europe after World War II, it was proposed to re-value the International Monetary Fund's gold reserves, which would allow the monetary fund to write-off African debts. In my opinion, Brown's efforts to help the poorest countries of the world are admirable. However, it remains to be seen whether he can persuade the United States and rest of the members of G-7 to endorse his plan. The next meeting of G-7 is scheduled to be held in July. France proposed a series of international taxes to raise funds for poverty alleviation in Africa.

While no one underestimates the importance of development aid in poverty alleviation, it is not enough. As pointed out by Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, what is absolutely vital for sustained economic development in poor countries is for them to have access to the markets of the rich nations. It fell upon a non-governmental organisation called Oxfam to remind the rich participants in Davos that a one percent increase in African exports would generate more income in Africa than all the aid given to the continent by rich nations in any given year. Globalisation should work both ways. As an Egyptian minister pointed out with heavy sarcasm, people in poor agricultural countries dream of becoming European cows because they receive per capita government subsidy of \$2 per day, while hundreds of millions of people in poor countries are forced to survive on less. Just to give

another example, a few thousand inefficient cotton growers in the United States become wealthier every year because of generous farm subsidies given by the government while millions of efficient cotton growers in Africa go out of business because they are driven out of the market by these subsidised cotton growers. This is why, despite all this talk about fighting poverty, one becomes rather sceptical about the final results. The reality of the situation is disheartening. In 1980, the ratio of per capita income difference between the less developed nations and those of the OECD was 1 to 30, but in 2004 it ballooned up to 1 to 80.

Climate change was another of the tough issues which provoked a lot of discussion on the Kyoto Protocol which "obliges industrialised signatory nations to cut emissions of carbon dioxide by 5.2 percent of their 1990 levels by 2012" and Bush's refusal to sign it. The protocol which has been ratified by 126 nations comes into effect this month. It was surprising to find that Blair had taken up the issue as one of his main concerns. He used the Davos venue to urge Bush to join a global accord to curb carbon emissions. It was evident at the conference that international pressure on the United States, the world's largest polluter, was growing. There were hopeful signs of increasing domestic pressure on Bush as well. Some US-based multinational corporations, who operate in countries who have signed the Protocol openly asked the current American administration to review its policy. Some of these companies were even thinking of implementing voluntary emission cuts. It was mentioned at the conference that California and some New England states had voluntarily introduced carbon emission restrictions.

As mentioned before, over the years, the WEF in Davos has evolved into a major informal networking venue for Western politicians, economists, bankers and intellectuals to exchange ideas and to influence each other. This certainly contributes to better understanding among the powerful nations of the world. Davos contributes to global peace in another subtle way. The world may not respect the United States (or at least its current war-mongering government), but it certainly fears its overwhelming power and "its disdain for multilateral institutions" like the United Nations. So, the world needs informal networking opportunities where the world (or at least an important part of the world like Europe) can engage the United States in informal discussions on "tough issues." The WEF in Davos, despite some shortcomings, does provide such an opportunity.

Four more wars, er, years!

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes
from Princeton

ULTIMATELY President Bush will do absolutely nothing to punish North Korea for its declaration that it is a nuclear power. Sure, there will be plenty of sabre rattling, snickering ("they are simply boasting"), and sound and fury, which will signify nothing. The inclusion of North Korea in Mr. Bush's "axis of evil," along with Iraq and Iran was a clever way of deflecting potential criticism that Mr. Bush was targeting only Muslim nations.

Mr. Bush was never interested in confronting North Korea, which is too far away to threaten Israel. Muslim nations near Israel are a different matter. Mr. Bush's Zionist neoconservative-controlled foreign policy agenda is to destroy Muslim

This is a very dangerous combination. Such people have caused many disasters in human history. Maximilian Robespierre, the French revolutionary who invented the Reign of Terror has been called 'the Great Simplifier' because of the terrible simplicity of his views, which he tried to impose with the guillotine.

"The ideologues who govern the thoughts and deeds of Bush are called 'neo-conservatives,' but that is a misleading appellation. Actually they are a revolutionary group. Their aim is not to conserve but to overturn. Mostly Jewish, they are the pupils of Leo Strauss, a German-Jewish professor with a (Russian revolutionary) Trotskyite past who ended up developing semi-fascist theories and propagating them at the University of Chicago. He illustrated his attitude towards democracy by citing the story of Gulliver:

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Americans are now waking up to the realities of Bush and the war in Iraq. Letters published in the newspapers criticizing Bush are becoming ferocious and brutal. Many Americans are leaving the US for Canada to wait out the Bush years. Even Republicans privately express grave misgivings about Mr. Bush's hidden agenda.

nations that are hostile to Israel, such as Iraq, Syria, and Iran, and punish those Muslim nations which are critical of Israel. That The New York Times sent Ms. Eliza Griswold to Bangladesh to report to the Americans on the "horrible" things happening in Bangladesh was not accidental!

No evidence, only suspicion is sufficient for President Bush to take action against Muslim nations. Without waiting to ascertain whether Syria had anything to do with the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the US recalled its ambassador. As the whole world now recognizes, Iraq's possession of nonexistent WMDs was used as a ploy to invade Saddam's Iraq, which had the temerity to hand out money to the family of Palestinian suicide bombers after they had blown themselves up. American planes and agents are now illegally scouring Iran to locate nuclear facilities to bomb. That Iran is being threatened by Israel and America proves that Iran does not possess nuclear weapons. After all, North Korea and China are not being threatened with democracy! America has always favoured Israel over the Arabs and the Muslims. Never in the history of America, however, has America been under the absolute control of the agents of a foreign nation, Israel.

If you do not believe me, read the following excerpts from an article written by Israeli peace activist Mr. Uri Avnery recently:

"Some people say, only half in jest, that the USA is an Israeli colony. And indeed, in many respects it looks like that. President Bush dances to Ariel Sharon's tune. Both the Houses of Congress are totally subservient to Israeli rightwing -- much more so than the Knesset (Israeli parliament). It has been said that if the pro-Israeli lobby were to sponsor a resolution on Capitol Hill calling for the abolition of the (Christian) Ten Commandments, both Houses of Congress would adopt it overwhelmingly. Each year Congress confirms the payment of massive tribute to Israel."

Avnery continues: "George Bush is a very simple, very violent person with very extreme views, as well being very much an ignoramus.

when a fire broke out in the city of the dwarfs, he put the fire out by urinating on them. This is the way, in his view, the small elite group of leaders must treat the ignorant and innocent public, which does not know what is good for them.

"In his coronation speech, Bush promised to bring freedom and democracy to every corner of the world. No less, no more. He cited the two countries in which he has already achieved his aim. Iraq and Afghanistan. Both have been devastated by American planes that dropped the message from their bomb doors. Recently, the American soldiers wiped a large city from the face of the earth in order to convince the opponents of 'American values.' Now Fallujah looks as if it had been struck by a tsunami.

"It is no secret that the Neo-Cons intend to 'bring democracy' to Iran and Syria, thereby eliminating two more traditional enemies of USA and Israel. Dick Cheney, the Vice President (certainly no Virtue President), has already prophesized that Israel may attack Iran, as if threatening to unleash a Rottweiler. It could have been hoped that after the total debacle in Iraq and the less obvious but equally serious failure in Afghanistan, Bush would shrink from more such actions. But as almost always happens with rulers of this type, he cannot admit defeat and stop. On the contrary, failure drives him on to more extremes, vowing, rather like the captain of the Titanic, 'to stay the course.'

"There is no way to guess what Bush may perpetrate, now that he has been re-elected by his people. His ego has been blown up to giant proportions, reaffirming what the Greek fabulist Aesop said some 27 centuries ago: 'The smaller the mind the greater the conceit.' He kicked out the hapless, feeble Colin Powell (as David Ben-Gurion eliminated Moshe Sharett in preparation for his 1956 onslaught on Egypt) and appointed Condoleezza Rice (as Ben-Gurion replaced Sharett with Golda Meir.) Now the order is 'clear the deck for action.' On the deck, Bush is a loose cannon, a danger to everyone around. The results of these elections may be viewed by history as a worldwide catastrophe.

"A friend of mine asserts that there are two souls residing in the American nation, a good one and a bad one. That may be true for every nation, including even Israel and Palestine, but in America it is much more extreme. There is the America of Thomas Jefferson (even if he liberated his slaves only on his death), Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower, the America of ideals, the Marshall Plan, science and the arts. And there is the America of the genocide perpetrated against the Native Americans, the country of slave traders and the Wild West myth, the America of Hiroshima, of Joe McCarthy, of segregation, of Vietnam and repressive America.

"During Bush's second term, this

nity and the Israeli lobby adopted him as one of their own. Life-long Democrats, such as former New York City mayor Ed Koch, deserted their party and campaigned for Bush. Although the nation was falling apart and was at war at home and abroad, with the neo-cons and the Israeli lobby micromanaging his campaign with lies, deceptions and fear-mongering, astonishingly, Mr. Bush won reelection!

Americans are now waking up to the realities of Bush and the war in Iraq. Letters published in the newspapers criticizing Bush are becoming ferocious and brutal. Many Americans are leaving the US for Canada to wait out the Bush years. Even Republicans privately express grave misgivings about Mr. Bush's hidden agenda.

Yet, as Uri Avnery says, President Bush will not change course. Why should he? Allegiance to Israel has reaped him enormous rewards. To have a smooth second term and a good legacy he needs the blessings of the Israeli lobby and is perfectly happy to do their bidding in Syria and Iran to achieve those personal goals. As the average Americans become more and more vociferous in their criticism and condemnation of the President, the only group that sings the praise of the president at the top of their voice in the newspapers, radio and television talk shows are the neo-cons and the Zionists.

Why should President Bush care about what anyone else says? The neo-cons have been great for the career of George W. Bush. Unfortunately, by controlling America's president and using American power to do Israel's dirty work, slowly but surely the neo-cons are destroying America.