

Outlook 2000 (Part Two)

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The year 2000 marks the boundary between two millennia. As a new year dawns, people talk of "ring[ing] out the old, ring[ing] in the new," and we tend to have the same perspective on the new millennium. We feel the coming days will be sunlit and cheerful, a time unlike our past, full of woe and darkness. The Age of Aquarius must be better than the one we just left!

Wise King Solomon begs to differ. "That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The year 2000 is nothing more than a line of demarcation between two equal yet arbitrary periods of man's history. The constant factor is mankind itself, whose human nature has not changed since the Garden of Eden. What has been is what will be.

So what will the opening years of the twenty-first century bring? What can we expect over the coming decade? More of the same! Our Savior Jesus Christ tells His disciples:

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. (Matthew 24:6-8)

As we saw in Part One, the game of nations—one power balancing another—will continue. With only one superpower, the United States, on the world stage, other nations will band into regional alliances to check America's hegemony. Of course, some regions will be more successful than others in limiting its power, and others, rather than contesting U.S. might, will take its side for the benefits such an association can bestow.

If America falters, look for the world's nations to take no pity on it to help it up. Should such a tumble from dominance occur, expect a mad scramble among the nations to fill the vacuum—and surely some powerful nation or confederation would, for as Galileo said, "Nature abhors a vacuum." However, most forecasters do not foresee such a fall in the next decade, though they think America's economy will face a downturn about 2005. How severe this downturn will be is not known, but the more severe it is, the greater the chances for world turmoil.

Asia

The world's largest landmass garners a great deal of attention these days, most of which is focused on two nations: China and Japan. All other Asian nations stand or fall based on the fortunes of these two dominant powers. China, the continent's largest nation in both land and population, is projecting its power throughout the region. Japan, possessing Asia's largest economy as well as an influential popular culture, is the natural—and only—balance to Chinese ambitions in the region.

Before 1997, Asia appeared to be surpassing the United States in economic power. At the same time, it seemed to redefine the traditional concept of international power based on the three pillars of economics, politics and military might. Thus, a new paradigm of power, economic growth alone, came into vogue.

The Asian economic crisis shattered the new and incorrect paradigm, humbling the region's economies. This experience has taught the governments in Asia a profound lesson: A nation cannot sustain power through economics alone; the old paradigm is the true one. A result of this is that, as Asia recovers its economic footing, its nations will attempt to erect the pillars of political and military power as well. With a more balanced power structure, Asia can become strong and potentially dangerous.

Both China and Japan are good examples of this change in thinking. Now that the rosy scenarios of Chinese economic expansion have proven unrealistic, Beijing has made it clear its power rests on its political will and latent military strength, with which it has suppressed internal opposition and confronted its external enemies (for example, Taiwan). It desires great power status, and to do this, it must begin to project its interests throughout Asia first. It will accomplish this using a three-pronged strategy, based on the three pillars of international power.

Japan, despite its economic woes, remains the region's largest economy, but trend watchers believe it has begun to move away from sole reliance on economic growth in favor of the balance of the three pillars. However, playing a leading role in Asia is not something Japan relishes; it is reluctant to seem to be returning to its pre-WWII status. What mitigates this is that a new generation of Japanese wants to redefine the nation's politics in the next decade. Looking to Europe as a model, these young Japanese leaders want to head an economic coalition of Asian nations, underpinned by a political and military framework.

Can they accomplish this? Yes. Tokyo has already begun to float ideas such as an Asian Common Market. It certainly has the military strength to make it workable. (Japan's annual defense budget is \$35 billion, exceeding both China and Russia. It has the largest navy of any Asian nation, a substantial standing army and technical superiority. Further, it is discussing how relevant Article 9 of its Constitution, banning the use of military force to settle disputes, is in today's world.) The only question is whether it has the political will to act as a great power.

The other nations of Asia are caught between these two greater nations. It is likely two opposing coalitions will emerge, one backed by Chinese power, the other by Japan—and both playing the other against the third power in Asia, the U.S. This potentially volatile mix of players will make plenty of headlines in the next decade.

Europe

On the surface Europe appears to have settled into a peaceful Union of economies and cultures. The euro has been fairly well received and stable against the dollar, and the economies of several leading nations, particularly Germany, have begun to stir from their doldrums. New nations, primarily from the eastern half of the continent, seek to join the European Union (EU) to take advantage of the benefits of the huge trading bloc, which is comparable to the U.S. economy.

Sunny as it appears, four dark clouds line the horizon. How many more nations can the EU integrate into its system before it becomes too cumbersome? How will the EU deal with member nations that will not submit to it? Will it be able to remain just a social and economic entity, or will it expand into a political and military union as well? Will one nation be forced to take the leadership of the giant alliance? These are serious questions, ones that the EU must answer over the next decade.

Why adding more nations to the EU could be cumbersome is because the present agreement allows any one nation to veto proposals. Adding new members merely increases the odds that progress will stop. Thus, in the next few years Europe will have to consider changing the way the EU makes decisions, probably to some kind of majority voting system. This will be hotly debated and divisive, and could even cause certain nations to consider pulling out of the alliance.

If that should happen, how will the EU react? Will it, like the Union during the American Civil War, go to war—economically, politically and/or militarily—with the secessionist state(s)? As of now, nothing prevents secession except national self-interest, but is that how the EU will see it? It is a serious question because this issue has never been tested before. All debate will center on the sovereignty of member nations and the nature of the bonds that hold them in the EU.

Will Europe, then, attempt to forestall any such divisive showdown and integrate more closely, that is, militarily and politically? Probably. The idea driving this trend is recent Russian assertiveness to recoup its former empire. Though Russia is weaker now, it must still be countered since it comprises most of expanding Europe's eastern flank. The only viable military organization available for integration is NATO, and the most likely scenario includes the EU co-opting NATO for its own purposes—with America's blessing, as it is in its interest to let Europe defend itself.

As for closer political union, it will also make progress. Current European Commission President Romano Prodi is aggressively trying to expand EU powers and forge stronger links between member nations. His intention is to make the EU a superpower, and this mandates total integration. If military integration occurs, political integration will be simultaneous or not far behind.

This begs the question, "Can the EU exist as a consensus alliance or will one nation step forward to lead it?" It is a question Europe does not care to answer, because it hinges on Germany. Currently, Germany is enduring a humiliating political corruption scandal, but this does not hide the fact that it is Europe's strongest nation. Would the rest of Europe, particularly France, accept German leadership? Over the past century or so, German unification (in 1871, 1914 and 1939) has always presaged war, and the nations of Europe are not unaware of this fact. Maybe a more pointed question would be, "If Europe will not accept German leadership, what will Germany do?"

Finally, another factor we must consider is a growing trend toward nationalism, especially in Eastern Europe. Austria, Hungary and several former Soviet allies are beginning to distrust the EU and turning inward. Joerg Haider's nationalist party has come to power in Austria, an event that terrifies those who remember Hitler's rise. This counter movement to the present internationalism may cause a few sparks to fly across the continent—and could ignite something greater.

The Middle East

While speaking of end-time prophecy, ministers frequently turn to Zechariah 12:3: "And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave

it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it." Lately, however, strategic interest in the Middle East has diminished. Even with the Middle East peace process still making headlines, the world's nations do not see this region as vital.

Why? None of the world's powers need this crossroads or what it produces to maintain its position. The great powers are not vying for the allegiance of the region's nations, as during the Cold War, nor is the supply of oil threatened, regardless of its high price. The Israel-Turkey alliance is successfully checking the Arab nations' desire to obliterate Israel. Perhaps most importantly, many of the Arab governments are in a state of decline.

A new generation of Arab leaders is about to burst onto the scene. Already, Jordan's King Hussein has been succeeded by his son Abdullah. Syria's Hafez Assad, 72, is ill. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, 71, cannot govern forever, nor can Muammar Qadhafi, 58, Saddam Hussein, 63, Yassir Arafat, 70, or King Fahd, 78. A few of these leaders have mellowed somewhat as they have aged, causing what passes for peace in the Middle East. This should continue until power passes to their successors, and maybe for a short time thereafter as the new leaders solidify their positions.

If these trends continue, the region should remain calm internationally over the next few years. However, this does not mean that internal squabbles for power, as well as inter-regional disputes, will not occur. Islamic uprisings will make life difficult for and may well topple some of the secular governments. The Arabs and the Jews will continue to rub each other the wrong way, but they will do business with each other. Absent any major military or political blunder, the Middle East will be somewhat disconnected from global affairs and intent on its own issues.

The Rest of the World

Other regions of the world, particularly Africa, Latin America and Australia, will play a small part in world affairs. Africa continues to slide downhill, both politically and economically, because of civil and ethnic war, corruption and disease. The only nation that has any chance of leading Africa is South Africa, but if it tries to do too much, it risks undermining its own precarious strength. Of all regions on earth, it truly needs the return of Christ!

Latin America is another turbulent region that may well become even more so. It has tried free markets and increased democracy, but as its individual economies have experienced recent downturns, its support for these policies has begun to fray. Nationalist, populist and communist forces point to these failings and have gathered strength. Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela—among other nations—all have internal divisions that augur instability and could spill over into other nations. There is little hope for this region to "break through" to its hoped-for stability and prosperity.

Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia will continue on the periphery of world events, although Indonesia's problems will cause some concern in foreign capitals. The reason for this is that the Indonesian archipelago sits astride shipping lanes between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Turmoil in the region means delays, higher costs and even piracy and damaged or sunken ships for companies that use Indonesian waters. Australia will try to do what it can to stabilize its neighbor, but it can offer only a Band-Aid when Indonesia needs a tourniquet.

What does this mean for the church? Nothing truly significant *seems* to be happening in world affairs—as if a temporary lull in the action has occurred. Zechariah 1:8-11 contains a prophecy that seems to fit this kind of time:

I saw by night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse, and it stood among the myrtle trees in the hollow; and behind him were horses: red, sorrel, and white. Then I said, "My lord, what are these?" So the angel who talked with me said to me, "I will show you what they are." And the man who stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, "These are the ones who the LORD has sent to walk to and fro throughout the earth." So they answered the Angel of the LORD, who stood among the myrtle trees, and said, "We have walked to and fro throughout the earth, and behold, all the earth is resting quietly."

This does not mean that things are not happening behind the scenes. The maneuvering of nations during this calm period may set the stage for what God says will occur before the return of Christ. Certainly, we have seen enough signs that the facade of stability, prosperity and peace can come down at any moment.

That suddenness is itself a key sign of the end of the age. Peter writes, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (II Peter 3:10). Paul prophesies similarly: "For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them" (I Thessalonians 5:2-3). Christ Himself tells the church at Sardis, "Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you" (Revelation 3:3). He later warns, "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame" (Revelation 16:15).

We need to take His advice to heart. If this is a lull in the action, it could be deceptive and short. We need to keep watching and keep our garments—our righteousness—clean and in good repair, so that anytime God sets end-time events in motion, we will be ready.