

Out of the Comfort Zone:

Finding Direction in a Disordered World

Interview with **Ayşe Zarakol**,
Professor at the University of Cambridge



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Cengiz Günay: Dear Ayşe, may I start with a very general question? The world is witnessing a major reconfiguration of power, particularly within the international system. We all sense that something bigger is unfolding, even if it's still difficult to understand where it will lead. I'd be interested in your assessment of current developments and how you would characterize this era.

Ayşe Zarakol: I think most scholars in international relations see this as a moment of big power transition, a time when great power competition has come back. This is mainly driven by the rivalry between the United States and China. They rival over spheres of influence, and there is an AI race between the two. However, great power competition is just one aspect of the fundamental changes that we are experiencing. The 21st century differs from the 20th in four fundamental respects. Firstly, we can observe a general erosion of trust across all regime types and across the globe. People distrust the institutions and political solutions that reflect the logic of the 20th century and that are based on political parties and ideologies. There are certainly exceptions where this is not the case, but, in most places, voters and citizens have increasingly rejected the 20th-century equilibrium. First signs of this development could already be observed at the end of the 20th century with the collapse of the

Soviet bloc. In fact, Eastern European societies were the first to reject the dominant political model; now this trend has also reached the West. In Western democracies, which were seen as the successful countermodel to communist dictatorships, we can now observe growing skepticism toward liberalism, democracy, and capitalism. There is growing skepticism toward the very values, norms, and institutions that we strongly associate with the West.

Secondly, there is the global trend of strongmen. They are different from those of the 20th century. While much of modern history was characterized by moving away from personalized states, where sovereignty resides with a person or a family, toward institutions and institutionalization, we are now witnessing a return to personalized sovereignty. This is not necessarily only tied to politicians. Some of the tech bros and oligarchs meanwhile appear to have reached state-level capacity. Some, such as Elon Musk, who for a time



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also led a state agency, may occupy an in-between position between state power and private entrepreneurship.

Cengiz Günay: Does this trend entail the gradual demise of the nation state?

Ayşe Zarakol: Not really. Nation states are still here. They continue to exist, but the growing distrust in the solutions and institutions of the nation state, together with the trend toward strongmen, indicates that the 20th-century nation state is not necessarily the building block that international relations assumes it to be. International relations has become more complex also because, thirdly, there is the rise of the rest.

Cengiz Günay: Do you mean the rise of non-Western countries?

Ayşe Zarakol: Yes, we talk a lot about the rise of the Global South, and some of it may indeed be hype. Great powers still possess greater capabilities, but

compared to the 19th and 20th centuries, many more countries now have significant resources and influence. Many of them were not even independent for much of the 20th century. As a result, there are now far more actors in international relations.

Cengiz Günay: What is the fourth factor?

Ayşe Zarakol: That is the volatility created by structural pressures. These pressures were not entirely absent in the 20th century, but they were not as drastic as now. Just think of the effects of climate change, or of technological change that comes with AI, robotics, surveillance, and so on. They change everything ranging from production to warfare.

Cengiz Günay: These are tectonic shifts that are taking place on different levels and simultaneously...

Ayşe Zarakol: Yes, we used to take the grounds for granted. Now the ground itself is shifting. Recently, I was at a meeting with Tanisha Fazal, who is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. She gave a talk on climate change in which she referred to the metaphor used by realist IR scholars that compares international relations to a billiard pool, and countries to billiard balls bouncing off one another. She argued that we are now at a moment when the billiard table itself has become unstable. I think this captures the situation of our time very well.

Cengiz Günay: Is this different from previous times?

Ayşe Zarakol: Yes, today, it's not just great power politics. When we studied great power politics of the 20th century, or of the end of the 19th century, we could assume a stable billiard table. Now, it is turning into quicksand. It makes things rather unpredictable.

Cengiz Günay: How would you then frame this moment of time?

Ayşe Zarakol: I would say we are in a moment of disorders.

Cengiz Günay: Is this temporary until a new order emerges?

Ayşe Zarakol: Many people believe that disorder cannot last long, and that some kind of order will emerge relatively quickly. This can be through a world war, or without war. Also, something resembling the Cold War order might come into being. However, I am skeptical. There are now so many variables that it is difficult to imagine any kind of decisive sorting event that could create equilibrium for everyone.

Cengiz Günay: Do you mean that a new order is more likely to emerge in consequence of a war, a catastrophe, or confrontation and deterrence?

Ayşe Zarakol: Hopefully not, but, yes, these are possible options. Of course, a World War would be horrible and no one wishes for that. But, objectively, the two world wars of the 20th century had an ordering effect: they re-ordered the world. They had the dimension of “world wars,” because, due to colonialism, European powers were everywhere. These two major conflicts of the 20th century were between blocks which shared certain European norms. A world war in the 21st century would be different.

Cengiz Günay: How?

Ayşe Zarakol: We have entered a new time. Today, the world is much less Eurocentric and also less organized than in the 20th century. The world is fragmented and divided into many camps. Europe is now one among many actors; it is not anymore the organizing actor. Many different conflicts overlap, but they do not coalesce.

Cengiz Günay: When you talk about an ordering actor, is this necessarily a state actor, or could it be also something like ideational change, ideology, technology that re-orders? >

Ayşe Zarakol: Well, it could be, but I don't see any candidates for that either. I mean, that's another contributor to disorder.

Cengiz Günay: We see the rise of authoritarianism. Could authoritarianism be a force that re-orders the world?

Ayşe Zarakol: As the new authoritarian systems are personalistic and not ideological, they are also quite unpredictable. This further deepens uncertainty and disorders.

Cengiz Günay: The title of this year's issue of our Magazine is "Beyond the Comfort Zone" and, as far as I understand, the ongoing changes mainly push Europe out from its comfort zone. Would you agree?

Ayşe Zarakol: I agree, a world in disorder is much beyond Europe's comfort zone. After World War II, Western Europe was quite sheltered. It was protected under the American security umbrella, practiced liberal democracy, and societies largely enjoyed the social welfare state. These things are still in place, and Europe's image in the world is still shaped by these assets, but they are fading. Western Europe was the beneficiary of the post-World War order. This order, and therefore Europe's privileged position in the world, are now ending. European states and actors, policymakers are having difficulties in coming to terms with these new realities. They have a hard time to let go and attain new positions.

Cengiz Günay: How about the future of the transatlantic partnership, which has been a cornerstone of European security?

Ayşe Zarakol: Europe is in a difficult position. Because of Trump, Europeans would like to chart a more independent course, but cannot do so easily, as for decades Europe delegated military protection, and all kinds of technology, to the US.

Cengiz Günay: Do you think this deep rift in transatlantic relations is more profound and will outlast Donald Trump and his presidency?

Ayşe Zarakol: It is certainly not only Trump. On the US side, this rift has much deeper legs. The estrangement on the US side has been coming for a long time. Maybe since the end of the Cold War. There have been people who did not want to invest in Europe and European security. Trump is just very blunt in the way he voices criticism, but many in the US think that Europe has been free-riding. In the future, a Democratic President may be more diplomatic, but it won't much change the course. The major concern is China's rise. Many Republicans and Democrats see the conflict with China as an existential rivalry. In part, this has been also pushed by the tech companies. Many in the US believe that Europe has to stand by the United States in this growing conflict, but they also think that if Europe chooses not to, the US could do without it. The rift would deepen if Europe were to push back. At the moment, European policymakers, whether on the Left or the Right, are trying to get by through a more conciliatory approach. Hence, there may not be a deeper rift in transatlantic relations, but that does not mean this is the best option for Europe. If Europe simply follows along without asserting a position of its own, then this is certainly not a good way forward for Europe.

Cengiz Günay: Do you think there are countries that might benefit more from disorder?

Ayşe Zarakol: I don't think that any country will benefit from this, but countries of the Global South and more peripheral countries such as Turkey for instance, have more practice in dealing with uncertainty. They were not primary beneficiaries of the old order. They are more used to dealing with adversity from great powers. They do not have the same emotional attachment to the

old world order. Europe, in contrast, is having more difficulties, because it has been used to order and hasn't developed practice in dealing with disorder.

Cengiz Günay: It seems the emerging disorder puts particularly democracies under stress.

Ayşe Zarakol: Yes, it is a difficult time for democracies. Whereas the liberal post-Cold War order incentivized democratization and many states tried to copy the Western model, today, the international environment is almost incentivizing a shift to personalistic regimes with small decision-making units. They promise to be able to react more quickly to developments and challenges. It has become all about short-term decisions, survival tactics, and deals. In other words, disorder is a structural environment that favors short-term thinking and planning. It is not the time of grand strategies, long-term plans, and lengthy institutional processes. This is another reason why it is difficult for the EU. Decision-making mechanisms in the EU are complex and they require consensus.

Cengiz Günay: Do we have historical precedents for this kind of disorder? Can we draw on examples from earlier periods in world history?

Ayşe Zarakol: I like to compare our time to the 17th century. In the 17th century, the old Asian order, which until then had been expanding, fragmented. The Northern Hemisphere was strongly affected by climate cooling, characterized by very cold winters and cool summers, which had severe effects on agricultural production. We can also observe demographic decline and the disruption of trade routes. The 17th century was also the era of the rise of absolutist rule, in which monarchs tried to concentrate all power in their own hands. At the same time, it was a period of major scientific discoveries. Although the situation today is not exactly the same, I like to refer to the

“Europe needs to decide what are the right things to hold onto, such as democracy, the welfare state, and putting citizens first.”

17th century as an analogy because it was a long period of disorder before a new order could emerge. I encourage people to think through that comparison, because I believe we need to be mentally prepared for the fact that the situation we find ourselves in today is unlikely to improve anytime soon. We need to figure out how to survive in an uncertain world with no agreed-upon rules.

Cengiz Günay: How did a new order emerge after the 17th century?

Ayşe Zarakol: Well, there was a long period of fragmentation, and then Europe created its own regional order. After the 30 years war there emerged the Westphalian system, and from there it created a global order, but not from scratch. It went to Asia and it repurposed some of the existing institutions, and routes, and so on. But, it took a long time. I don't think we can talk about a global order comparable to the one that was lost after the 16th century. The establishment of a new order took almost 200 years, until the end of the 18th century. Today, everything is happening much faster. There is an accelerating effect of technology, and civilization has become more complex. Therefore, I would not say that it is going to take 200 years, it might take much shorter. However, we need

to be prepared that it may not just take a few years. It may not be a blip. Much of the early part of the 21st century will most probably remain fragmented.

Cengiz Günay: Do we then need to prepare ourselves for chaos?

Ayşe Zarakol: No, it doesn't necessarily mean that there will be chaos. There will be pockets of order where rules still apply. But we need to understand that the things we used to take for granted, such, for instance, a rules- and law-based international order, is fragmenting. However, it is also important to say that this order never really worked as described, and certainly not for everyone in the same way. However, the world seemed to have a center, and a hierarchy, and now it is just fragmenting.

Cengiz Günay: Do you see new opportunities that open up beyond the comfort zone? What are Europe's opportunities in this new era?

Ayşe Zarakol: When you are stepping out of the comfort zone you start to rethink some things that don't work

well. But, at the same time, there is a lot that is great about Europe and European democracies. Europe needs to decide what are the right things to hold onto, such as democracy, the welfare state, and putting citizens first. I think Europe is great about those things; it has a relatively egalitarian vision of society. And then you need to get rid of some things to be able to adapt to new realities. Europe will need to abandon a hierarchical view of the world, and the assumption that Europe has always the best answer for everything. It should develop a more egalitarian view of the world and be able to also learn from other places.

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