

## **The Trilateral Commission at 25: 1973 - 1998: *Between Past and Future***

### **From the Trilateral Commission's Chairmen**

A full quarter of a century has passed since a small group—Japanese, North American, and European—met at the initiative of David Rockefeller. His challenge was direct and timely: How could our three democratic, economically advanced regions be encouraged to work more closely together in the face of the oil crisis, the monetary disturbances, and the new opportunities and uncertainties in Asia? The group clearly recognized that array of problems was symptomatic of the need for increasingly interdependent societies to reach common understanding and to maintain cooperative approaches. Out of those discussions, three distinguished participants—Takeshi Watanabe, Gerard C. Smith and Max Kohnstamm—agreed to chair a new effort to engage a larger group of respected and committed men and women from each of the three areas.

Fortunately, they were able to enlist Zbigniew Brzezinski as Director. Thus, the Trilateral Commission quickly found its name, identified its purpose, and began its work.

The “Trilateral process” was set in motion. Few would now question, we think, that the time was right and the purpose relevant—that we were on the “cutting edge”. Our work has helped stimulate the closer collaboration of the G-7 countries. We have observed, too, that a number of other, typically more specialized forums, have developed in the non-governmental world.

Wisely recognizing the reality of change and the need for evolution, our founders insisted that a time limit be set for the work of the Commission. They contemplated that after three years our work and relevance would be reviewed. The life of the Commission would be continued only if its relevance could be maintained. The rule of three-year renewal has remained to this day.

In retrospect, how does that record stand up? Have the initial principles been maintained and assumptions been relevant? Are we still on the “cutting edge”? The answer seemed clear at the time of the momentous developments of 1989/90, so powerfully symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Cold War was over. But the end of that common threat only reinforced the need to deepen our cooperation while needing to enlarge our partnership.

The Commission, moving with characteristic caution and care in our internal debates, has continued to find its way forward.

Our three regions have long shared a common devotion to democracy and to free and competitive markets. And it's still true that Europe, Japan and North America

remain both the dominant economic areas and key partners in maintaining a secure and open international system. At the same time, it is obvious that over the life of the Commission the ideals of free and democratic societies have spread powerfully around much of what used to be called the Second and Third Worlds. It is also true that the emerging nations have become more and more significant participants in an open world economy, helping to shape the destinies of all of us.

That is why, extending its practice of inviting a few key voices from other areas to its debates, the Commission is now including on a regular basis other leaders from Asia, from Latin America, from Eastern Europe, from the Middle East, and from Africa. In joining in our work, these participants symbolize and represent the simple fact that collective responsibility for maintaining a peaceful and prosperous world is necessarily becoming even broader.

As we look ahead to the new challenges of our ever-more integrated world, we remain conscious of one of the basic convictions of our founders. The core countries with which the Commission started—with all their weight in the community of nations—need first of all to maintain the vitality of their own societies, their democratic traditions of governance, and their economic freedom. Only strong and self-confident nations, secure in their own ideals and principles, will have the moral and material strength to cooperate together in dealing with the implications of their growing interdependence.

We now stand on the threshold of a new millennium. Far from symbolizing the “end of history”, the turn of the calendar only emphasizes the range of challenges— technological, environmental and political— in a world of accelerating change. These challenges are without precedent, full of large opportunity but also enormous risk.

Plainly, the purposes that brought the Commission into being some 25 years ago remain relevant today. In that context, we have renewed our mandate once again.

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