

First Plenary Meeting  
Vienna, Austria<sup>1</sup>  
6-18 November 1983

### **The Inaugural Meeting at the Height of the Cold War**

When the InterAction Council held its first plenary meeting in Vienna, Austria, the Cold War was at its height. The U.S. deployment of Pershing II missile in Western Europe had caused bitter controversy on the European continent. Negotiations on MRFA and START were stalling. Soviet military aircraft had attacked and destroyed a South Korean civilian airliner over Sakhalin, and a terrorist bomb in Rangoon, Burma, had assassinated 16 senior South Korean officials. Economically, the western world was suffering from inflation, high interest and unemployment rates; the developing world was devastated by their external debts. Only a week before the first plenary session, Soviet General-Secretary Leonid Illich Brezhnev demised after ruling for years and bringing a sense of frozen stability to the Cold War. In such conditions of ominous uncertainty, twenty former heads of state and government gathered in Vienna, the capital of the old Habsburg Empire and the frontline of the Cold War, in the late fall of 1983. It was already snowing in Vienna and the temperature dropped to minus 10 degree C in mid-November.

The initial plan was to invite more than two dozen former heads of state or government to this inaugural meeting from all the five continents of the world. But it was during the peak of the Cold War, and there was no qualified leader from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, almost as a balancing factor, no United States former Presidents was invited to the meeting, though there were three. The convenor of the meeting, former Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda of Japan, understood that the central agenda of the Vienna Session was to urge the two superpowers to make greater efforts towards disarmament and peace. He knew that the Interaction Council should either have members from both the United States and the Soviet Union, or from neither of them.

As for the major European states, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had been preparing to challenge for the French presidency and decided to defer his participation. Instead Jacques Chaban-Delmas, the former Prime Minister under President George Pompidou, came from France. Helmut Schmidt had to cancel his participation immediately prior to the meeting because of the special congress of his Social Democratic Party to discuss the deployment of SS-20 missiles on German soil. Domestic politics also prevented both Ted Heath and James Callaghan, the former Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom belonging to opposing parties, from participating.

The absence of former leaders from these major Western states caused certain fears about the

viability of the Council. Some observers were apprehensive that the participants from the developing world may turn the Council into a mini UNCTAD. Fukuda was not pessimistic, however, about the future of the Council. Despite travelling for 20 hours to get to Vienna, he began immediately after arriving in Vienna to explain individually to all the invitees what he wished to bring about through the InterAction Council. With almost religious zeal, he persuaded each former leaders either bilaterally or during the deliberations in the meetings to concur with his convictions.

“This forum is not to insist on the narrow national interest of our respective countries or regions. We are no longer the head of state or government of our respective countries. So, rather than being bound by national interest, why don’t we concentrate our experiences and wisdom to address long-term, global issues that could determine the survival of mankind?” he argued persuasively.

Sometimes, Fukuda’s individual talks stretched to beyond midnight. And before the first session started, most participants from diverse regions and representing different ideologies had understood what the InterAction Council should stand for.

The first session of the inaugural meeting took place at the Hofburg (Hapsburg Palace). It had been agreed to make the “Opening Ceremony” open to invited guests, and a large number of Austrian government officials and diplomats, UN officials, academics and mass media were invited to it. Fukuda shared his conviction as the convenor with the audience through his key note address.

“Today, the world is threatened from two fronts, the economic and political.” He analysed the economic situation of 1983 – the diminishing productive activity, decreasing investment, high and unstable interest rates, fluctuating exchange rates, signs of protectionism, decreasing world trade and increasingly dangerous external debt levels. He compared the situation with that in the late 1920s and warned that the mistakes of the ‘20s must never be repeated.

What worried Fukuda more were political and military difficulties of the day. At various points during the 38 years of East-West confrontation, there had been signs of détente and reconciliation. However, since the mid-1970s, the world had entered a dangerous phase “Any of the ongoing regional conflicts could lead to far more frightening consequences than a shot at Sarajevo (which had triggered World War I),” he warned.

Fukuda’s utmost concern was the arms race between the U.S. and Soviet blocs and the ever-increasing military expenditures. He pointed out that the ballooning military expenditures was the main cause of fiscal deficits in so many countries, and this in turn was the main factor impeding the revitalisation of the world economy. He also warned that the world already had nuclear arsenal stockpiles that amounted to more than a million times the destructive capacity of the bomb dropped

on Hiroshima.

“Where are we going?” asked Fukuda. “The primordial task, for the InterAction Council is to build a foundation towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why don’t we use our collective intelligence and wisdom to consider the elements that constitute such a foundation for the sake of mankind?”

The 21<sup>st</sup> century was still 18 years away, but this message set the tone for the ensuing three-day closed session and thereby the future direction of the Council. Recognising that world peace was being threatened on two fronts, the politico-military and the economic, the Council identified the following three priority issues to tackle.

- (1) Peace and disarmament
- (2) Revitalization of the world economy, and
- (3) The nexus of issues involving population, environment and development (later universal ethical standards was added)

Deliberations during the ensuing closed sessions were based on Fukuda’s keynote speech. On the issue of peace and development, the Council members reached agreement on several main points, which were to be incorporated into the final statement.

They appealed to the parties involved in arms control and reduction talks to make every effort in the interests of the whole of humanity to avoid a breakdown in these talks and to reach an agreement that would be effective. All nations were asked to halt the expansion of conventional and nuclear weapons and to initiate effective measures to reduce the enormous stockpiles of nuclear arms. The Council asserted that peace would be enormously strengthened if there were no medium-range missiles in Europe and other parts of the world; that where small countries were involved in conflicts, distant powers should refrain from exacerbating them; and that peace in the world could be restored only if justice, freedom and human rights prevailed. Controlling exports of weapons and armaments, particularly to developed countries, was urged.

On the revitalisation of the world economy, the greatest concern during the closed session turned out to be the external debt of the developing world. The Council called for several steps: a short-term moratorium on debts were necessary along with a reduction in real interest rates; rearranged payment schedules and the cancellation of debt in whole or a in part; an urgent increase in the resources of the International Monetary Fund and more appropriate IMF conditionality; shifting attention from crisis management to a more integrated approach; and correlating the issues of trade and access to markets, the debts of the developing countries, the internal deficits of the industrialized nations and stabilisation of exchange rates among major economic blocs.

### **Unique and energetic members**

The 20 participants were all unique. Malcolm Fraser, former Prime Minister of Australia (1973-83, later to become the Council Chairman) moved busily with the very tall height of almost 2 meters. He was adamant about the importance of free trade, asserting that the frequent failure of trade talks was caused by opposition by one or several big powers; he suggested giving priority attention to a new code against protectionism. He was nicknamed “Mt. Fuji” by Mr. Fukuda. Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria had stepped down from office on his own will because he wanted to transfer the power to civilian hands (arrested by the very successor later but freed, enabling him to win the Presidential election in 2002). He and Ahmadou Ahidjo, former President of Cameroon came in colourful national costumes. Both enthusiastically appealed for help in debt relief as a step on the road to helping their countries emerging from poverty. Mathias Mainza Chona, former Prime Minister of Zambia, delighted some and embarrassed other participants by addressing everyone “Sir.”

Lebanon’s Selim Hoss, former Prime Minister of Lebanon, wearing a rimless pair of glasses, was a professor of economics at the American University of Lebanon then. The ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict was a personal burden to him. Since he had been threatened with assassination, he did not disclose his whereabouts to anyone. He naturally appealed that the world should treat the Palestinian question more seriously. He later served as Prime Minister of Lebanon four more times. The oldest participant came from Tunisia, Hedi Nour, former President, who had to be pushed around on a wheel chair, accompanied by his medical doctor.

From Colombia came Misael Pastrana Borrero, a graceful blanco-blanco whose elegant disposition spoke of his class. He died in 1997 but his son, Andres, was elected to the Presidency the following year (and who later joined the Council) his neighbour, Carlos Andres Perez, former President of Venezuela, painted a sharp contrast with Pastrana. He spoke fiercely and intensely, and his dark and energetic face often became red as he passionately explained the plight of an indebted country. He was re-elected to the presidency of Venezuela later. From the Caribbean came Michael Manley, former Prime Minister of Jamaica, whose insistent demand was for fairer trade.

Kirti Nidhi Bista, former Prime Minister of Nepal was always accompanied by his wife, who was only half his height. Speaking of the plight of a land-locked country, he sought an increase in ODA specifically for such land-locked countries. Kriangsak Chomanan, former Prime Minister of Thailand, was a general who seemed uneasy in discussion that were not in his field.

From Europe came Ola Ullsten, former Prime Minister of Sweden, who later served as Swedish ambassador to Italy. Jacques Chaban-Delmas, Prime Minister under President Georges Pompidou,

was a known resistance fighter during World War II. His darkly shining eyes spoke of his courageous past. Kurt Furgler, a thrice former President of Switzerland (1977, 1981, 1985), was a multi-lingual lawyer, switching his speech from French to English to German depending on whom he was addressing. The only woman participant was Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, former Prime Minister of Portugal (1979). An engineer by training, she gave out the air of a warm Latin “Mama.”

From the Eastern bloc came Manea Manescu of Romania, a brother-in-law of President Nicolae Ceausescu. Constantly championing the United Nations, he later was jailed after the collapse of Communism. Mitja Ribicic, a former Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, gently proposed disarmament. The former Hungarian Prime Minister, Jeno Fock, was silent almost all the time. It seemed as though he was under watch by his interpreter, an official from the Hungarian Foreign Ministry.

The first Vienna session was chaired by Kurt Waldheim, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, who later became the Federal President of Austria. Bradford Morse, Administrator of the UNDP, headed the secretariat largely consisting of UN officials.

The former leaders gathering Vienna were honoured by several officially hosted events. The most memorable was a luncheon hosted by then Federal President of Austria, Dr. Rudolf Kirchschlager at the Habsburg Palace. A tour of the magnificent palace building produced a delightful break to many.

At the end of the session, the participants unanimously agreed to choose Takeo Fukuda as the Honorary Chairman of the InterAction Council and it was announced that the second plenary meeting would be held in Brioni, Yugoslavia. Fukuda was delighted with the choices, but he was determined to secure a greater involvement of Helmut Schmidt to give more intellectual substance to discussions as well as weight and authority to policy recommendations in the final statements. He knew that the Council would be less viable otherwise.