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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR



End of Whose History?

By KISHORE MAHBUBANI

SINGAPORE — The 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall has just been celebrated. For many, that momentous event marked the so-called end of history and the final victory of the West.

This week, Barack Obama, the first black president of the once-triumphant superpower in that Cold War contest, heads to Beijing to meet America's bankers — the Chinese Communist government — a prospect undreamt of 20 years ago. Surely, this twist of the times is a good point of departure for taking stock of just where history has gone during these past two decades.

Let me begin with an extreme and provocative point to get the argument going: Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End of History" may have done some serious brain damage to Western minds in the 1990s and beyond.

Mr. Fukuyama should not be blamed for this brain damage. He wrote a subtle, sophisticated and nuanced essay. However, few Western intellectuals read the essay in its entirety. Instead, the only message they took away were two phrases: namely "the end of history" equals "the triumph of the West."

Western hubris was thick in the air then. I experienced it. For example, in 1991 I heard a senior Belgian official, speaking on behalf of Europe, tell a group of Asians, "The Cold War has ended. There are only two superpowers left: the United States and Europe."

This hubris also explains how Western minds failed to foresee that instead of the triumph of the West, the 1990s would see the end of Western domination of world history (but not the end of the West) and the return of Asia.

There is no doubt that the West has contributed to the return of Asia. Several Asian societies have succeeded because they finally understood, absorbed and implemented the seven pillars of Western wisdom, namely free-market economics, science and technology, meritocracy, pragmatism, culture of peace, rule of law and education.

Notice what is missing from the list: Western political liberalism, despite Mr. Fukuyama's claim that "The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism."

The general assumption in Western minds after reading Mr. Fukuyama's essay was that the world would in one way or another become more Westernized. Instead, the exact opposite has happened. Modernization has spread across the world, but it has been accompanied by de-Westernization.

Mr. Fukuyama acknowledges this today. "The old version of the idea modernization was Euro-centric, reflecting Europe's own development," he said in a recently published interview. "That did contain attributes which sought to define modernization in a quite narrow way."

In the same interview, he was right in emphasizing that the three components of political modernization were the creation of an effective state that could enforce rules, the rule of law that binds the sovereign, and accountability. Indeed, these are the very traits of political modernization that many Asian states are aspiring to achieve.

Asians surely agree that no state can function or develop without an effective government. We feel particularly vindicated in this after the recent financial crisis. One reason the United States came to grief was the deeply held ideological assumption in the mind of key American policymakers, like Alan Greenspan, that Ronald Reagan was correct in saying that "government is not a solution to our problem; government is the problem." Fortunately, Asians did not fall prey to this ideology.

Consequently, in the 21st century, history will unfold in the exact opposite direction of what Western intellectuals anticipated in 1991. We will now see that the "return of history" equals "the retreat of the West." One prediction I can make confidently is that the Western footprint on the world, which was hugely oversized in the 19th and 20th centuries, will

retreat significantly.

This will not mean a retreat of all Western ideas. Many key ideas like free-market economics and rule of law will be embraced ever more widely. However, few Asians will believe that Western societies are best at implementing these Western ideas. Indeed, the assumption of Western competence in governance and management will be replaced by awareness that the West has become quite inept at managing its economies.

A new gap will develop. Respect for Western ideas will remain, but respect for Western practices will diminish, unless Western performance in governance improves again.

Sadly, in all the recent discussions of “the end of history,” few Western commentators have addressed the biggest lapse in Western practice. The fundamental assumption of “the end of history” thesis was that the West would remain the beacon for the world in democracy and human rights. In 1989, if anyone had dared to predict that within 15 years, the foremost beacon would become the first Western state to reintroduce torture, everyone would have shouted “impossible.”

Few in the West understand how much shock Guantánamo has caused in non-Western minds. Hence many are puzzled that Western intellectuals continue to assume that they can portray themselves and their countries as models to follow when they speak to the rest of the world on human rights.

This loss of moral authority is the exact opposite outcome that many Westerners expected when they celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Does this mean we should give up hope? Will the world become a sadder place?

Probably few in the West remember the last paragraph of Mr. Fukuyama’s essay. He wrote: “The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.”

Here, too, as the 21st century unfolds, we will see the exact opposite outcome. The return of Asia will be accompanied by an astonishing Asian renaissance in which many diverse Asian cultures will rediscover their lost heritage of art and philosophy.

There is no question that Asians will celebrate the return of history. The only question is: Will the West join them in these celebrations, or will they keep waiting for the end to come?

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