

November 10, 2011 9:40 pm

Letter to Netanyahu: time is no longer on Israel's side

By Kishore Mahbubani

Friends of Israel unite! The time has come to send a common message: time is no longer on Israel's side. Geopolitical forces are moving inexorably against it.

One cardinal mistake no small state should make is to put all its eggs into one basket, even a basket as strong as the US. Despite its huge influence, Israel cannot change the shifting geopolitical tides. America's power has peaked: its economy will not shrink in absolute terms but it will shrink irresistibly in relative terms. This would have happened naturally but gradually. But the continuing economic crises in the US will hasten the decline in America's influence. Shrinking budgets will cut defence and aid expenditures. A crippled economic giant with no rockets to launch its astronauts into outer space will lose its "mystique". Countries will no longer hesitate to vote against American preferences.

This is what happened with the Unesco vote of October 31. The news agencies reported correctly that 107 countries voted in favour of admitting Palestine into Unesco and 14 countries voted against. What they failed to report is that these 107 countries represented 77.5 per cent of the world's population; the 14 countries just 7.3 per cent. The American founding fathers called in the Declaration of Independence for "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind". The American decision to suspend Unesco funding clearly showed no such decent respect.

There can be no doubt where the opinion of "mankind" is headed on the Israel-Palestine issue. The world is exasperated with Israeli intransigence on the two-state solution. It is even more exasperated with the continuous increase in illegal Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Some European states voted with Israel but their citizens are clearly sympathising more and more with the Palestinians. The world knows that while Americans and Europeans love to preach the virtue of speaking "truth to power", they have displayed total cowardice on the Israel-Palestine issue.

This cowardice now poses the greatest existential threat to Israel. Few friends of Israel dare tell it the inconvenient truth that time is no longer on Israel's side. American power is declining relatively. Europe is becoming progressively irrelevant. Equally important, the power of the Islamic world has troughed. Now the relative

influence of the Islamic world can only increase, despite the many challenges it faces. Turkey's assertiveness, especially on the Israel-Palestine issue, is a sign of the new world order that is emerging.

The democratic revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia also end the era of pro-Israel dictators. Future leaders of these countries will have to reflect their populations' sentiments. No future Egyptian government can impose sanctions on Hamas as Hosni Mubarak did. Pressure to speak out against Israel will grow. In Saudi Arabia, Prince Turki al-Faisal has warned that, "With most of the Arab world in upheaval, the 'special relationship' between Saudi Arabia and the US would increasingly be seen as toxic by the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims, who demand justice for the Palestinian people."

The 5bn non-American and non-Muslim peoples of the world will have to make a clear choice: between supporting Israel (with lukewarm dividends at best from a declining America) or voting against Israel (buying insurance from a rising tide of anger in a more assertive and democratised Islamic world). Equally important, justice weighs in favour of giving the Palestinian people a right enjoyed by virtually every other people in the world: statehood.

Neither the US Congress nor Israeli nuclear weapons can protect Israel when the balance of geopolitical forces tips against it. And Israel could well trigger such a tipping point with any unilateral military strike against Iran. No one can predict the consequences when Israel becomes totally isolated from the global community. But it will not be a pretty picture. Hence, Israel's friends should act quickly and send a short letter saying: "Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu, time is no longer on Israel's side. Please work quickly to implement the two-state solution that President Bill Clinton proposed in January 2001."

The late Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban once said: "The Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Sadly, the same may some day be said of the Israelis.

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