

The west must work to understand a new world order

By Kishore Mahbubani

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As the world becomes inexorably smaller, denser, more interconnected and more complex, the biggest danger the world faces is western groupthink, which fails to spot the thousands of nuances that are vital to interpret international affairs. Crisis after crisis would be avoided if the west could learn to understand these nuances better.

Take, for example, the crisis the west worries about most: Iran. The western narrative is clear: the Israeli government may have no choice but to bomb Iran this year, as time is running out to prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb. Yes, time is running out for the Israeli government. But the immediate threat in the minds of the Israeli government is not the Iranian bomb. It is the fear of Barack Obama's re-election. As Mr Obama whispered to Demetri Medvedev, he will have more freedom to launch bold initiatives in his second term. And this is the Israeli government's nightmare: that Obama will push for a two-state solution (even though, incidentally, it would be in Israel's long-term interests).

Yet western groupthink suggests that the west is honest and straightforward while Iran, as usual, has been lying and mendacious. In fact, the record is less clearcut. For reasons still unknown, the US government walked away from a deal it asked Brazil and Turkey to offer to Iran, which Iran had accepted. This is why Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the UN nuclear watchdog, asked: "Can the west take yes for an answer?" Equally importantly, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's strongman supreme leader, said: "the Islamic Republic, logically, religiously and theoretically, considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin." This is as strong a message as Iran's leader can convey to the Iranian people. If Iran is bombed after denouncing nuclear weapons, it will produce a century or more of anger towards the west, just as the Anglo-American coup against Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953 produced half a century of distrust. In short, any bombing of Iran would be an unmitigated disaster for the west.

Now let's take another crisis: North Korea. Yes, it was foolish and unnecessary for impoverished North Korea to launch a rocket. But did the North Korean regime have any agenda besides developing the capability to reach America with a ballistic missile? Was it pure coincidence that it was launched on the 100th anniversary of the birthday of Kim Il-Sung, the regime's founder? Was regime legitimisation an equally important goal? And wait – something even more amazing happened in North Korea. Immediately after the rocket failed, the North Korean government admitted failure. Holy cow – the North Korean government admitted it was fallible. This is truly a big deal. North Korea has taken a huge leap towards becoming a "normal" country. Did anyone in the west notice this nuance? Alas, no one. The US government once again imposed more sanctions. Does isolating an isolated country really work?

To answer this question, let us look at a third country that is slowly but steadily walking away from a crisis: Myanmar. Here too, the dominant western narrative is clear: western sanctions finally forced open Myanmar. Sadly, the dominant western narrative is wrong. Western sanctions did not work. ASEAN engagement with Myanmar did. The regional organisation forced Myanmar's officials and leaders to attend thousands of meetings in ASEAN countries. These travels opened their eyes to how far Myanmar was falling behind: they realised it had to become a more "normal" country.

Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak, was right in saying "that ASEAN has been instrumental in driving both economic growth and political development, and that there can be no clearer example than its relations with Myanmar. For many decades, Myanmar was on the receiving end of very public diplomatic scoldings, often backed up by sanctions... But ASEAN members took a more nuanced view, believing that constructive engagement and encouragement were just as effective, if not more, than sanctions and isolation in creating positive change."

As usual, western media largely ignored this reality and gave all the credit to Hillary Clinton and David Cameron. A self-serving western narrative just cannot understand the complex new world that is emerging – and progressing, while the west languishes. Yet the era of western dominance is gone. Can the west begin to understand the new and more complex world order unfolding before our eyes day by day?

The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, and author of 'The New Asian Hemisphere'