

# Western slant on China skews shape of things to come

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We are entering a new era of world history marked by two distinct features. First, after 200 years, we will see the end of Western domination of world history (but not, of course, the end of the West). Second, we will see the return of Asia. From the year 1 to 1820, China and India were consistently the two largest economies of the world. Hence, by 2050 or earlier, when they once again become the two largest economies, we will return to the historic norm of the past 2000 years. And, in history, it is easier to return to historical norms than to deviate from them.

The end of Western domination of world history means that we have to drop our Western cultural lenses to understand this new era. This will require retooling the most influential Western minds in the world; in governments, think-tanks, the media and academies. These thousands of Western pundits have a disproportionate influence on the global discourse. And because their minds are filled with distorted perspectives, they generate false understandings. Since this is a strong claim to make, I will support it by providing three examples of distorted Western perspectives on China.

The first fundamental flaw in Western assumptions about China is that eventually, like all the other successful developed economies, China will join the great Western project and become "just like us". The leading Western minds cannot even conceive of the possibility that there may not be one road in history. Hence, even though a few explore the possibility, they still believe that China's present Communist Party-run government cannot survive. It will only be a matter of time before a "rose" or "orange" revolution surfaces. The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 are interpreted as an early tremor and a foretaste of what would happen in China: the overthrow of the communist state and the arrival of a Western-style liberal democracy.

The combined population of the West is about 860 million. The population of China is about 1.3 billion. It takes historical arrogance to assume that Western civilisation is large enough to absorb Chinese civilisation. The simple truth is that China has such a strong and distinctive culture of its own that it will not be absorbed by the West. Nor will it join the Western project. This does not mean that China will reject all aspects of Western civilisation. China and the rest of Asia are rising because they have finally understood, absorbed and started implementing seven pillars of Western wisdom: free market economics, mastery of science and technology, meritocracy, pragmatism, a culture of peace, rule of law and education. However, the modernisation of China is also accompanied by de-Westernisation. This, too, is a radical departure from recent history. In the Western mind, modernisation means Westernisation. The idea that we could have one without the other is inconceivable to Western minds. But de-Westernisation is one of the largest processes unfolding in China (and indeed throughout Asia). As a result, we will move from a world dominated by Western civilisation to a world in which we will see many different successful civilisations.

The second fundamental flaw in Western assumptions about China is the belief that if China does not become a Western-style liberal democracy, it will collapse. This deep Western desire to believe that the Chinese regime is about to collapse was revealed most clearly at the height of the financial crisis of 2008-09. I could not keep track of the number of Western media stories that reported how the collapse of Chinese economic growth (which they ascribed only to China's ability to export to affluent Western economies) had led to more than "40,000" protests, and predicted that these would eventually escalate and bring down the regime.

Virtually no Western analyst pointed out the obvious flaw: it was based on the assumption that the Chinese people would be stupid enough to overthrow a regime that had given them 30 years of some of the world's fastest growth because of one year of bad economic performance.

Equally, virtually no Western analyst could conceive of the possibility that the Chinese government might prove to be far more competent than its Western counterparts in managing an economic crisis. A brief comparison of the US and Chinese economic stimulus packages would show why China performed better. The US package was hijacked by several special interest groups that were more interested in feathering their own nests than rescuing the economy. The Chinese package has worked brilliantly.

The third fundamental flaw in Western assumptions is the belief that China cannot rise peacefully. Just as the rise of new powers in Europe in the 19th century led to war and conflict, the same would happen as new powers rose in Asia in the 21st century.

The real stress test for any region comes with an economic crisis. It was the Great Depression of the 1930s that contributed significantly to the outbreak of World War II. And the Great Recession of 2008-09 was the biggest economic crisis that the world had experienced since the 1930s.

If the Asian region already had a volatile cocktail of geopolitical rivalries ready to explode, the recent financial crisis should have triggered an eruption. Instead, nothing happened. Why? Because there is a deeper political consensus among Asian countries that they would be giving up their best opportunity to develop if they got involved in zero-sum games of geopolitical rivalries. Hence, while there are rivalries between, say, China and India and China and Japan, all have learnt how to manage these. Hence, China's peaceful rise represents neither a fluke nor a temporary phenomenon. It is a result of superior geopolitical management by the Chinese leadership.

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