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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

America's Conflicting Destinies

By KISHORE MAHBUBANI

President Barack Obama's departure for his first trip to Asia as president was delayed by a day to allow him to attend the memorial service for victims of the Fort Hood massacre. The delay symbolized well the tension between America's two destinies.

The United States would like to link more closely with the Asia-Pacific century that it has sparked. Yet it is constantly held back by its tragic involvement with the Islamic world.

The biggest strategic mistake America made in the 20th century was to interweave the destiny of 300 million Americans with the fate of 1.3 billion Muslims.

It did this in several ways. First, it created and stoked an army of jihadists to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and then, after the Cold War ended, thoughtlessly walked away from its creation. Second, it backtracked from a sensitive and balanced policy on the Israel-Palestine dispute — which had paved the way for Camp David (1978), Madrid (1991) and the Oslo Accords (1993) — for an unbalanced, partisan position that angered and humiliated many Muslims.

Of course we can read the tragic and senseless killings at Fort Hood as the deranged act of one man. But it would be intellectually dishonest not to acknowledge that some of the anger he expressed reflects a larger anger in the Islamic world.

Indeed, many of the tragedies that America has experienced in recent decades reflect America's troubled entanglement with the Islamic world — Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. None of these troubles were predestined; they are the result of geopolitical hubris and incompetence.

By contrast, the biggest strategic gift that America has made to the world is to spark the rise of Asia by generously sharing its wisdom and best practices with millions of Asians. It is dangerous to over-simplify history, but some crude facts are undeniable. If the American dream had not been discovered and created, and Europe had continued to dominate world history, Asian societies may not have awoken from centuries of slumber so quickly and smoothly. American generosity saved Asia.

Even now, each year about 90,000 young Indians and 80,000 young Chinese study in American universities. Is it any wonder that China and India are re-emerging as the world's largest economies? And is it any wonder that the best practices they are using for their dynamic new corporations are taken from lessons provided by American universities? This is one reason why when businessmen from both sides of the Pacific meet they speak a common language: American.

This is why it was truly regrettable that President Obama's trip to Fort Hood caused him to miss a whole day of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. More than a thousand chief executives from across the region had come to hear him speak. He could have spurred them on to achieve greater heights in building stronger trans-Pacific links. Yet, once again, a tragedy linked to West Asia prevented closer American involvement with East Asia.

It is vital to emphasize that this is not the first time this has happened. Countless secretaries of state have cut short or canceled meetings with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations because of events related to the Middle East.

President George W. Bush should have been the first American president to attend a summit meeting with the Asean leaders in May 2007, but this meeting was canceled in favor of a 24-hour photo opportunity in Baghdad. Instead, the honor of being the first U.S. president to hold a summit meeting with Asean fell to Mr. Obama.

Asean can play an extremely important role in reducing American tensions between its two conflicting destinies. There are more Muslims in the Asean region than in all the Arab world. Because the three predominantly Muslim countries in Asean — Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia — have linked their destinies to the dynamic Pacific region, their future prospects are much brighter.

The country where President Obama is the most popular is the world's most populous Islamic country, Indonesia, where his status is akin to that of a rock star. It was regrettable that he could not find time to visit Indonesia during this trip. A mere 24 hour stopover in Jakarta would have demonstrated that deeper entanglement across the Pacific promises a happier destiny for America.

The time has come for American strategic thinkers to stop functioning on auto-pilot, retaining policy prescriptions and practices from the past. The president's schedule should reflect investment in the future.

President Obama did make some bold commitments to the region. In Tokyo, he promised that "the United States will also be engaging with the Trans-Pacific Partnership countries with the goal of shaping a regional agreement that will have broad-based membership and the high standards worthy of a 21st century trade agreement." And if the United States delivers on this commitment to build a stronger partnership, it will show that it is moving toward investing in the future and not being hobbled by its past.

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