

FROM THE AMERICAN TO THE ASIAN-PACIFIC CENTURY?

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About one hundred years ago, Theodor Roosevelt thought that the Atlantic era had reached the zenith of its development, that its resources were exhausted, and that it would be replaced by a greater, a Pacific era. Today, it is forecast that this era will not be Pacific, as the late US president believed, but Chinese.

After 1945, the USA was the greatest among the military powers that remained on the globe, and in the years that followed, it constructed networks of bilateral and multilateral alliances under its own leadership. Rising new structures in the international system included the Organization of American States and, even more so, the United Nations with its global fabric of dedicated sub-organizations. Later, some of them turned into tools in the struggle against a communist world that was similarly organizing itself.

As the leading economic power, the US generated half the global industrial output for years and provided a crucial stimulus to technological and scientific modernization. Thus, Princeton, Harvard, and Stanford were globally recognized as top academic institutions. Meanwhile, however, the American century is no longer universally accepted, and there are doubts about its ability to survive.

The American age became a formula that helped many to understand civilization. Being Western was the ruling creed of the 20th century, and after the Second World War, America was loath to part with its role as the force that provided the impulses. Although Britain influenced the destiny of the world to a similar extent in the 18th century, its input always remained tied to a specific historical period. Compared to that, the influence of the USA in continental Europe was more sustained. Nevertheless, the forces generated by both countries penetrated and left their stamp on civilization. One case in point is the global importance of the English language, which has remained unchallenged to this day.

Early in the 19th century, Europe's colonial powers began to look at Asia. Japan wrested hegemony in Korea from the Chinese as early as 1895. The outbreak of the second Sino-Chinese war in 1937 raised the curtain on the Asian stage of the Second World War. Western imperialism in Asia finally disappeared when the armistice of Paris was concluded in 1973. Decades later, the Tiger States symbolized a new era of economic growth in East and Southeast Asia. Even before that, Deng Xiao Ping paved the way to greater economic growth in China when he broke with the cultural revolution in 1979. In the last three decades, the Chinese succeeded not only in enhanc-

ing their role as a considerable military power within the region but also in materially increasing the country's average per-capita income.

Needless to say, the US has been criticized for infiltrating the entire planet. Its penetration has given rise to irritation in politics, culture, and business, all the more so because Washington's 'imperialism' took on some quasi-psychotic features under Bush jr., who raised 'national security' to the status of a master doctrine after September 11, 2001. Only now Barack Obama seems to be preparing the ground for change.

A specifically American problem is the budget burden the country has to bear. As the most indebted state in the world, the USA is hard put to maintain its imperial overstretch, mainly because of its military interventions. Moreover, the country's unbridled Anglo-Saxon breed of capitalism is under pressure to justify itself. America's middle classes formed the pillar that supported the country after 1945, but this pillar is melting down and losing its strength. Even the political system itself is ailing. To be sure, there is greater freedom in the USA than in Russia, China, or Saudi-Arabia, but the attractiveness of the US is gone in many countries.

Having lost a great deal of credibility both at home and abroad, the USA is deeply frustrated that its own ideas of democracy and economic order should no longer be seen as a role model. Because of the crisis which it is undergoing, there is a general desire to refurbish the old concept. Mr Obama wants the country to 'return to our entire history'. But what is the use of the old model in a globalized world in which entire countries and societies are endeavouring to preserve their culture and their identity? The world has become more complex in the 21st century, and the future of humanity is at stake. The global challenges of the future demand not a leading power but a network of global partnerships to create new values. The pivots of our world are no longer those of the world inhabited by Mr Ford, Mr Carter, Mr Bush jr. and sr., and Mr Clinton. New powers are on the rise, and people are thinking about a 'post-American' world.

The coming era may be Asian, but that is not the only option. At the same time, Asia's self-contemplation is fed by many sources – the intellectual revival of the debate about Asian values, diverse forms of cooperation, and a self-confidence underpinned by success. In 1992, the future governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, wrote a book entitled *We are the global power. Why the future belongs to Japan*. The work radiates pride in the region's technological potential and the power of a past that is thousands of years old. Only a little later, Kishore Mahbubani, a dean at Singapore's National University, wrote his article *Can Asians think?*, in which he challenges the popular 'West-against-the-rest' formula. According to the author, Asia should take a greater

part in shaping present-day innovations because only those who manage to convince the Second World would lead in the struggle over global leadership.

Moreover, the fact that Asia's organizations are growing together is essential for its self-assurance. For decades, the region has been expanding its structures step by step, enhancing regional cooperation and creating a potential for even more intense collaboration in the future. Founded in 1965, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) played an important part from the start. In 1993, the ASEAN Regional Forum was created. Next in line came the ASEAN +1 process which involved the People's Republic of China and, in a next step, the ASEAN +3 process in which China, Japan and South Korea participated. Today, ASEAN +6 involves India, Australia, and New Zealand as well. Moreover, there is now the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) with the Latin-American littoral states of the Pacific, a manifestation of the new Asian-Pacific fermentation process which also contributes to the Asians' search for a regional identity.

Because of the headlong development of the Asia-Pacific region, the West will soon have to abandon its philosophy of business as usual. Yet Asia cannot replace America as the eponym of a new era because its performance is not convincing. First, our globalizing world is based on models of civilization whose soft power is bearing fruit. This does not apply to Asia. There is no uniform Asian model, and one or more hybrid models cannot guide an entire century. Second, we would have to ask who might be the pivotal player in Asia. We cannot have a Chinese century because China's overall image is not convincing. Thus, for example, no case can be made on the basis of China's economic growth because, in its current form, it is ecologically not sustainable as well as vulnerable, as the current crisis shows. And third, Asia lacks that balance of powers which is at the bottom of any international outreach.

The challenge posed by Asia and the Asia-Pacific region targets Europe and the USA. Both will have to inject new vitality into the Western model. Especially the USA should be careful to avoid the feeling of being patronized among the nations of the world which leads to the clashes of civilizations referred to by Mr Huntington. Europe and the USA are strong enough to provide impulses for civilization in the future. At the same time, the extent to which a continuation of the 'late Western civilization' is acceptable to the rest of the world remains in question.

In fact, today's global civilization is essentially Western in nature. What has so far been created and articulated by countries like Israel, Greece, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany, the Slavonic world, Scandinavia, Iberia, the USA, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand is a network of acculturations developed in an open historical process that was certainly en-

riched from the outside, i.e. by the cultures of Arabia, the Far East, and India.

Needless to say, we cannot have a permanent residue of disempowered countries in which most of the global population live. Yet the question is where the impulses for an Asian age might come from. Sources named include China, the ASEAN countries, Japan, Korea, and Asian-Pacific multilateralism. Then again, not even Asia will accept the idea of a Sino-centric world. In China, there are no cosmopolites who are aware of a global responsibility. ASEAN is heterogeneous, underdeveloped, and without significance in power politics. Japan has never played a geopolitical role, and besides, it is still oppressed by its historical burden. And Korea has been unable even to overcome its own division so far.

For the time being, there appear to be no alternatives to the global players of our time, the USA and Europe. At the same time, the exceptionalism of the USA has probably reached the end of its tether now. The world is deeply disappointed with the role played by the Americans on the global stage so far, although their new president has been raising some hopes. To play an eminent global role in the future, the USA will have to rely on reconciling interests instead of enforcing its own.

Now, what design potentials does Europe have to offer? For one thing, it has been increasingly perceiving itself as a social state ever since the 19th century, thus proving its civilizational competence. For another, it succeeded in eliminating violence from the management of its complex internal plurality, even though much blood had to be shed on the way there. Third, it has been able to motivate its members to relinquish their national sovereignty, at least in part. Fourth, the actions of Europe's governments are predictable, at least as a general rule. Fifth, the continent is able to conduct politics at more than one level. Sixth, Europe's intellectual soil is well prepared for transnational thinking. Seventh, all this has been achieved with a minimum use of force. Eighth, the freedom of societal development is greater in Europe than in most other regions. And ninth, the continent does have the potential to develop new, forward-looking ideas because of its inner diversity.

Impressive as Europe's 'virtues' may be, and although the world of tomorrow will be closely tied at its core to the input of Western civilization, that world will not be uniformly democratic, liberal, and freedom-oriented, but complex, contradictory, and conflict-ridden. Compromise will be indispensable. Analytical power will be needed. Sensitive dealing with cultural hermeneutics will be in demand. Europe is well equipped to face the new challenges – possibly better than America.

IN: Auslandsinformationen 9/2009, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.,
Berlin, p. 128-133