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2029, the Great Asian Renaissance

By **Kishore Mahbubani**

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Asians were dominated and sometimes humiliated by Westerners during the last two centuries. Today, they look to the future with confidence. In 2050, the world's two leading powers are likely to be China and India. The great Asian Renaissance will lead to geopolitical upheavals. China-US tensions are already visible and conflicts may emerge between Asian powers. Yet the clash of civilizations is not inevitable.

politique étrangère

The 21st century will be the Asian century, just as the 19th century was the European century and the 20th century the American century. Of this, there can be no doubt. From the year AD1 to 1820, the two largest economies of the world were those of China and India. The past 200 years of Western domination of world history were therefore a major historical aberration. All aberrations come to a natural end. Already in 2019, in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms, three of the four largest economies are Asian. The top four are China, USA, India and Japan. By 2029, the Asian share of global Gross National Product (GNP) will be even larger.

While there can be no doubt that the 21st century will be an Asian century, there is some doubt as to whether it will be a happy Asian century. With all the great shifts of power taking place in Asia, there are natural fears that Asia will be torn apart by geopolitical conflicts. Indeed, over twenty years ago, an eminent American political scientist, Aaron L. Friedberg, predicted that "Europe's past could be Asia's future".¹ Just as the great shifts of power in Europe at the end of the 19th century led to great European wars in the 20th century, the same could happen in Asia.

1. A. L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Winter 1993-94, p. 7.

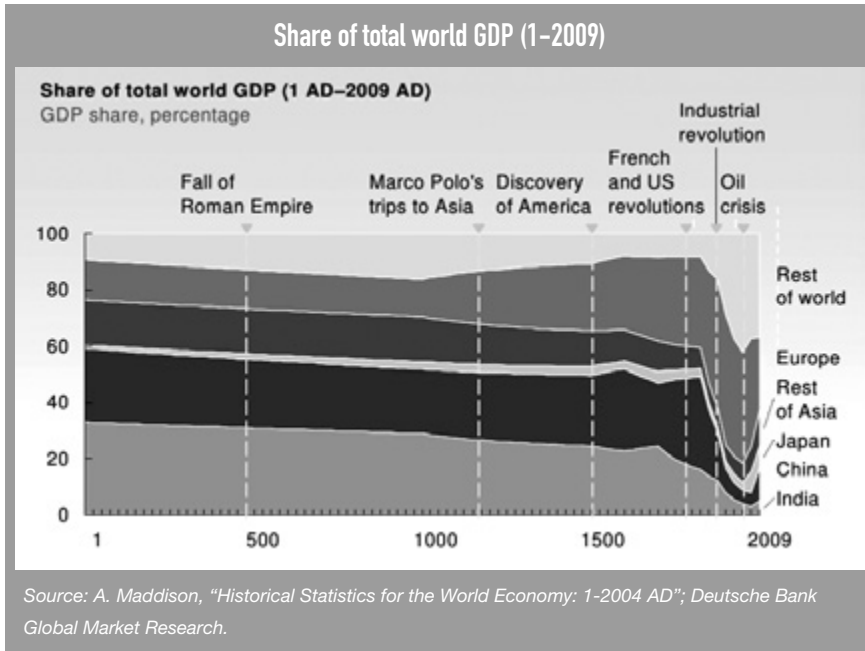
Many in the West believe that Asia is even more prone to conflict and division because, unlike Europe, there are no common cultural links between the different Asian societies. Asia, in this European perspective, was always divided and will always remain divided. This perception is mistaken. Actually, before the European colonial era, Asia was deeply connected. As Professor Farish Noor says:

*“In his book, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (1990), Dr K. N. Chaudhuri noted that from Yemen to China, almost the entire land mass of Asia was connected via a network of terrestrial and maritime trading routes long before the continent was carved up by the colonial powers in earnest from the late 18th century onwards.”*

A small personal story about my Asian identity will help to reinforce the point about deep connectivities in Asia. I was born to two Hindu Sindhi parents in Singapore in 1948. As a result, I can feel a direct cultural connection with over a billion Hindus in south Asia. Similarly, nine of the ten southeast Asian states have an Indic cultural base. Hence, when I see the Ramayana and Mahabharata performed in these nine states, I also feel directly connected with them. Over 550 million people live in this Indic space.

My Hindu parents left Pakistan in 1947 because of the painful partition between India and Pakistan. Yet, as a child, when I learned to read and write the Sindhi language, I did not use Hindi script. Instead, I learned Arabic script. My name, Mahbubani, comes from an Arabic/Persian word, “Mahboob”, which means “beloved”. Hence, when I visit the Arabic or Iranian cultural spheres, I can also feel a direct cultural connection with these societies. Similarly, when I visit the societies of northeast Asia, especially China, Korea and Japan, I can feel the tug of cultural affinity when I visit their Buddhist temples. Buddhism originated in India. My Hindu mother would take me to pray in Buddhist as well as Hindu temples when I was young.

In short, as a single Asian individual, I can feel direct cultural connections with societies at the two ends of Asia, from Tehran to Tokyo. There are deep cultural connectivities within Asia that will resurface and gain momentum in the 21st century. The main thesis of this essay is that we will see a spectacular Asian cultural Renaissance by 2029, as the middle-class populations of Asia explode. Yet it would be foolish to predict that the road ahead will be a smooth one. History never moves forward in a straight line. There will be ups and downs.



Seven pillars of Western wisdom

Even though many in the West have been surprised by the spectacular resurgence of Asian economies, this return of Asia could have been predicted. When I published my first volume of essays, titled *Can Asians Think?*, in 1998, I spelled out over two decades ago the forces that were regenerating Asia. Ten years later, in *The New Asian Hemisphere*², I argued that Asia was succeeding in regenerating itself because it had understood, absorbed and implemented seven pillars of Western wisdom.

It is worth listing out these seven pillars because, tragically, at a time when Asian societies are succeeding because they have embraced these seven pillars of Western wisdom, some Western societies are walking away from them. These seven pillars are free-market economics, science and technology, meritocracy, pragmatism, culture of peace, rule of law and education.

Of these seven pillars, the most important may well be the culture of pragmatism. I am not a psychologist by training. Hence, I should hesitate to make psychological judgements. Yet, having lived and worked in Asia for

2. K. Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008.

over seventy years, I feel personally that the great strength of Asian societies is this psychological tendency to be pragmatic. The Japanese were the first to demonstrate this in the Meiji Restoration in the 1860s. They asked themselves why the great Asian societies of China and India were floundering while the small European states were thriving and dynamic. Having observed this closely and realizing that Japan would be the next Asian country to be colonized – especially after Commodore Perry's warships appeared in Tokyo Bay in July 1853 – the Japanese wisely and astutely observed, learned and adopted the West's best practices to rejuvenate their society.

The world has been surprised by the spectacular growth of the Chinese economy. One statistic is particularly stunning. In 1980, in PPP terms, China's share of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 2.32% while that of the US was 21.56%.³ In short, China's share was about ten percent that of the US. Yet, by 2014, few in the world noticed that China's share had

The art of pragmatism

become larger. How did China accomplish this spectacular feat? The answer is complex. But one key part of the story is that the main Chinese reformer, Deng Xiaoping, learned the art of pragmatism from many of the previously successful Asian economies, including Japan and the four Asian tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore). Indeed, the best definition of the term pragmatism is provided in a pithy saying of Deng: "It doesn't matter if it's a black cat or a white cat, if it catches mice, it's a good cat."

The curious paradox of our times is that, while Asian societies absorbed the virtues of pragmatism from the West, many Western societies have become progressively less pragmatic even as Asian societies have become more so. President Donald Trump provides the most powerful example of this retreat from pragmatism. Western economic theory has demonstrated that countries that trade extensively with the world have prosperous economies while those that don't have less prosperous economies. The world does not have to look beyond the contrasting economic fortunes of North Korea and South Korea to understand the virtues of international trade.

Despite the monumental evidence in support of the virtues of international trade, President Donald Trump is prepared to walk away from it. More dangerously, on ideological grounds, he is even prepared to cripple and paralyze the World Trade Organization (WTO) by refusing to allow the nomination of judges to the Appellate Body. Pascal Lamy, the former Director-General of the WTO, has stated categorically that President

3. GDP based on PPP, share of world, IMF World Economic Outlook (October 2018), available at: <www.imf.org>.

Trump is wrong. He said: “Mr Trump believes that imports are bad and exports are good. This is wrong”. Europe’s share of global trade is higher than that of the US. Virtually no European leader supports the views of President Trump on trade. Yet, even the combined weight of Europe is unable to influence or restrain Donald Trump.

By contrast, Asia is making pragmatic adjustments and moving on. When President Trump walked away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement President Obama had negotiated with 11 countries, it could have collapsed. Instead, the other countries decided to proceed with it without the participation of the US. Similarly, the dialogue partners of ASEAN are proceeding with another trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). It hasn’t been concluded but it is moving forward.

This culture of pragmatism, which is spreading steadily around Asia, provides strong reasons for hope that the Asian economies will continue to do well. Nevertheless, many geopolitical challenges remain. One big question for Asia is whether the Asian countries will be as pragmatic in the geopolitical sphere as they have been in the economic sphere.

Asian geopolitics

Asian pragmatism in the geopolitical sphere will be severely tested as a massive geopolitical struggle will break out between the world’s number one power, the US, and the world’s number one emerging power, China, in the coming decade. Indeed, future historians are likely to trace the beginning of this massive geopolitical struggle to January 2018, when President Trump launched a trade war against China. This trade war escalated in 2018 until the G20 meeting in Argentina on December 1st 2018, where Presidents Trump and Xi announced a temporary “ceasefire”.

While most of Trump’s actions in America are divisive and polarizing, the trade war against China won deep and mainstream support. Fareed Zakaria has stated that “on one big, fundamental point, President Trump is right: China is a trade cheat”. While rejecting Trump’s zero-sum view of trade that America can only “win” by beating China in a trade war, Tom Friedman nonetheless agrees with him that China is guilty of “stealing intellectual property, massive government interventions, ignoring WTO rules, lack of reciprocity and forcing Western companies to pay to play inside China”. He writes: “That’s why it’s a fight worth having. Don’t let the fact that Trump is leading the charge distract you from the vital importance of the U.S., Europe and China all agreeing on the same rules for 2025 — before

it really is too late". Democratic senator Chuck Schumer has gone on record to say that, "when it comes to being tough on China's trading practices, I'm closer to Trump than Obama or Bush". The strong support Trump received gave a powerful signal that virtually the entire American establishment had reached a consensus that the time had come for the US to stand up to China. Hence, when Vice President Mike Pence delivered a hostile and condescending speech against China on October 4th 2018, almost no voices in America condemned him. Instead, even traditional pro-China voices, such as former Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson, worried that a new "economic iron curtain" was descending between the US and China.⁴

In the worst-case scenario, if some kind of severe Cold War 2.0 breaks out between the US and China, the Asian states may be forced to take sides. However, no Asian state would want to take sides in such a cold war. Even the traditional allies of the US in Asia-Pacific, including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand, are reluctant to take sides. This is understandable. These allies know that the US will be around in the Asia-Pacific for the next hundred years. However, China will be around for the next thousand years. Hence, it would be unwise for any Asian country to alienate China, the greatest power in Asia. In economic terms, all major Asian states, including American allies, have closer economic links with China. Australia, a fellow Western country, is proud of its alliance with America. It once described itself as the "Deputy Sheriff" of the US in the Asia-Pacific. Yet, as the Australian scholar Hugh White warned his fellow Australians, "it seems we're still clinging to the idea that America will remain the dominant power in Asia, that it will be there to shield us from China, and that China can somehow be convinced to happily accept this. So, our government has once again failed to come to terms with the full implications of the profound shifts that are transforming our international setting. It is a triumph for wishful thinking over serious policy."⁵ Given its troubled history with China in the 20th century, Japan has the most to fear from a vengeful China. Yet even Japan would be reluctant to join a strong anti-China coalition.

China has also severely undermined any American capability to launch a containment policy against China (similar to the successful American containment policy against the Soviet Union) by developing close and strong economic relations with all of its neighbors. Table on page 179 clearly

4. "Ex-US Treasury Chief Henry Paulson Warns of Economic Iron Curtain", *Straitstimes*, 7 November 2018, available at: <www.straitstimes.com>.

5. H. White, "America or China? Australia Is Fooling Itself That It Doesn't Have to Chose", *The Guardian*, 26 November 2017, available at: <www.theguardian.com>.

shows that virtually all Asian countries trade more with China than with the US. In addition, with the launch of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the close trade ties between China and its Asian neighbors will be further enhanced by strong infrastructural connectivity. Indeed, it is remarkable that China will be deploying trillions of dollars of its own capital to build roads, bridges, railways, ports, power stations and electricity grids in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Most Asian states will thus pragmatically avoid taking sides in any geopolitical struggle between the US and China.

This Asian policy of pragmatically avoiding taking sides will be reinforced if the European states, led by the European Union (EU), adopt a similar strategy. Indeed, it would serve European interests to be equally pragmatic since European geopolitical interests toward China are not the same as America's. Geopolitics is always based on geography. Since the geography of Europe is different from that of America, the number one geopolitical threat to Europe is not the same as that to America. A single demographic statistic will clearly spell out Europe's main geopolitical threat. In 1950, the population of the 28 member states of the EU was double that of Africa's. By 2017, Africa's population had become more than double that of the EU. By 2100, Africa's population may be ten times that of Europe.

Trade of major Asian countries with US and China (2016)⁶

Partner Name	Trade with China (US\$ Million)	Trade with US (US\$ Million)
Bangladesh	15170.03	7026.23
Brunei	732.40	628.69
Cambodia	4759.20	3277.35
India	70161.89	69392.54
Indonesia	53531.53	26161.38
Japan	274939.18	198351.25
Korea, Rep.	252681.63	114189.24
Lao People's Democratic Rep.	2346.57	88.17
Malaysia	86929.80	49164.65
Myanmar	12285.36	446.23
Pakistan	19145.25	5726.20
Philippines	47232.46	18574.94
Singapore	70510.20	44754.52
Sri Lanka	4560.32	3282.06
Thailand	75715.07	40901.49
Vietnam	98265.70	53861.42

6. World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), available at: <<https://wits.worldbank.org>>. Figures are rounded to 2 decimal places.

In 2015-2016, a small surge of migrants from Africa and the Middle East led to a hysterical reaction in Europe, fueling a surge of support for populist parties. It's not difficult to imagine the political impact on Europe if this small surge of migrants is replaced by a massive surge. It is in Europe's long-term interest to see enhanced economic and infrastructural investments in

A geopolitical alliance between Europe and China?

Africa, which will incentivize Africans to look for jobs at home rather than migrate to Europe. These are the concrete benefits China is delivering to Europe by investing massively in Africa. Logically, we should see a strong geopolitical alliance between Europe and China – with Japan and India joining in too – to massively develop Africa. Instead, in an almost suicidal move, Europe has been opposing Chinese investment in Africa because Europe has developed a habit for deferring to American geopolitical policies, even if they prove to be self-destructive policies in Europe.

Yet, there is always hope that Europe could one day wake up and realize that it is in its interest to be as pragmatic as most of the Asian states in dealing with China. Most Asian states will want to see a strong American presence remain in Asia to balance China's influence. However, they would prefer to see a non-confrontational American presence that pragmatically resolves many of the difficult issues that remain unresolved in the Sino-American relationship. The trade issues are difficult, but it does not take great imagination to think of potential win-win economic solutions if American and Chinese leaders decided to look for them. By contrast, the remaining geopolitical issues, such as Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula, may be more difficult to resolve.

The one positive contribution that President Trump has made to Asia-Pacific security has been to “unfreeze” the most frozen conflict in the region: the Korean peninsula divide. The growing nuclear capabilities of North Korea in recent years led to growing fears that a conflict between the US and North Korea was inevitable. The issue is far from resolved. However, Trump's meeting with Kim Jong-Un in Singapore in June 2018 led the world to realize that, despite its erratic streaks, the North Korean government is a rational actor bent on enhancing its security and development, not on undermining regional peace and security. President Moon Jae-In of South Korea has also developed a closer relationship with his North Korean counterpart than any of his predecessors. Hence, it would be reasonable to predict that the Korean Peninsula issue will not go off the rails.

By contrast, it is far from clear that the democratically elected government of Taiwan will be as rational in its behavior. The Taiwanese desire

to retain their autonomy is understandable. Paradoxically, the best way for Taiwan to retain and expand its autonomy, as it did under President Ma Ying-jeou from 2008 to 2016, would be to cultivate a relationship of trust and understanding with the government in Beijing. However, the politics of Taiwan are unpredictable. There are forces arguing for full independence for Taiwan. So far, since the normalization of relations between the US and China in 1979, the US has played a responsible restraining role in squashing any Taiwanese push for independence. President George W. Bush applied great pressure on the then Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian to deter him from pushing for independence. Most thoughtful American policymakers advocate a continuation of the *status quo* arrangement to prevent Taiwanese autonomy. Then US Secretary of State John Kerry assured Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in January 2017 that “the one-China policy based on the three Sino-American joint communiqués remains the consensus of both [Democratic and Republican] parties”.⁷ However, as President Trump has surrounded himself with ideologues like John Bolton, there is a danger that the US could force the hand of China by supporting Taiwanese independence. There is one key point that no American policymaker should underestimate. In Chinese eyes, the last vestige of the century of humiliation that China experienced from the Opium War in 1842 to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 is the unresolved issue of Taiwan. No Chinese leader can afford to be seen to be weak in promoting the policy of eventual reunification of Taiwan. Thus, if, post-Trump, the US could revert to its usual stance of supporting the autonomy, not independence, of Taiwan, the issue could remain under control.

Similarly, the South China Sea issue could remain under control if all the concerned parties continue a similar policy of restraint. The conventional Western perception of Chinese behavior on the South China Sea is that China has become unnecessarily aggressive in this area. This perception fails to make a critical distinction between aggressive behavior (which implies military actions to change the *status quo*) and assertive behavior (with no military actions). A senior retired American diplomat, probably one of the finest diplomats America has produced, Ambassador Stapleton Roy, has told me that the Obama administration missed a valuable opportunity to demilitarize the South China Sea issue. He explained that, in a joint press conference with President Obama on September 25, 2015, Xi Jinping proposed a more reasonable approach on the South China Sea. Xi supported full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of

7. S. Jiangtao, “America Will Stay Committed to One-China Policy, John Kerry Tells Beijing”, *South China Morning Post*, 5 January 2017, available at: <www.scmp.com>.

Parties in the South China Sea, signed by China and all 10 ASEAN members, called for early conclusion of the China-ASEAN consultations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea, and added that China had no intention of militarizing the Spratly Islands, where it had engaged in massive reclamation work on the reefs and shoals it occupied. Ambassador Roy said that

The distinction between aggressive behavior and assertive behavior

Obama had missed an opportunity to capitalize on this reasonable proposal. Instead, the US Navy stepped up its naval patrols. China responded by proceeding with militarization. There is no question that the weight and influence of China on the South China Sea issue will grow. However, it is also true that it is not in China's national interest to alienate the ASEAN community on this issue. As Jeffery Sng and I document in our book *The ASEAN Miracle*, the South China Sea issue can be managed pragmatically and carefully by all parties.

The one big divisive issue in Asia that could prove to be difficult to manage is the relationship between Asia's two great powers, China and India. Many observers have predicted that, by 2050, the second largest economy will not be the US. It will be India. Hence the main contest between the world's number one and number two powers will not be between the US and China in 2050. It will be between China and India. The Sino-Indian relationship is obviously deep and complex.

The good news is that for most of the two thousand years that China and India have interacted with each other, the two powers have lived in peace with each other. On the cultural front, there has also been traditional reverence in China toward India as it was the birthplace of one of China's major religions, Buddhism. Indeed, in the first millennium after Christ, many Chinese scholars travelled long distances to visit India. The famous Chinese scholar and monk, Xuanzang, is well known for his travels to Nalanda, the oldest university in the world until it was destroyed by Turkic invaders in the 12th century. Hence, if both Chinese and Indian scholars look at their deeper historical relationship, there is no reason for animosity between these two great Asian powers.

Unfortunately, recent history has been more troubled. In 1962, the two sides fought a brief military battle, which scarred India. In addition, during the Cold War, China joined the US in supporting India's traditional adversary in South Asia, Pakistan. China also supplied the nuclear technology that enabled Pakistan to become a nuclear power. For a while, during the prime ministership of Manmohan Singh, from 2004 to 2014, relations went on an upward trend, with total trade between the two countries

rising from US\$10.2 billion in 2004 to US\$71.7 billion in 2014.⁸ Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Premier Wen Jiabao captured the positive spirit of Sino-Indian relations in a joint statement in 2010: "There is enough space in the world for the development of both India and China and, indeed, enough areas for India and China to cooperate."⁹

Relations became more difficult after Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, even though initially relations went well. Two sticking points emerged. First, there was a tense standoff between Indian and Chinese forces at Doklam in June-August 2017. Second, a more difficult problem emerged when China and Pakistan announced that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would go through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which is also claimed by India. As a result of this, India has become the most prominent Asian country to avoid participating in China's BRI projects.

All this would indicate that relations between these two powers will remain difficult. Nonetheless, a spirit of pragmatism also affects this relationship. Hence, even though India refuses to participate in BRI meetings, it has joined the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) set up by China. Indeed, India has been the largest borrower from the AIIB so far.¹⁰ China and India have also cooperated to set up the New Development Bank under the rubric of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The latest meeting between President Xi and Prime Minister Modi in Wuhan in April 2018 went well, with the two leaders agreeing "to significantly enhance efforts to build on the convergences through the established mechanisms in order to create the broadest possible platform for the future relationship".¹¹

In short, even though there will be many geopolitical challenges as Asia keeps rising, the Asian capacity to pragmatically manage these challenges will remain equally strong. Moreover, the greatest rising Asian power, China, has shown a clear tendency to avoid military solutions wherever possible. This explains the sharp difference in the military behavior of China and the US. Since a brief naval skirmish between China and Vietnam in March 1988, China has not fired a single bullet across its borders in over

8. Details available at: <<https://wits.worldbank.org>>.

9. Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Joint Communiqué of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China", 16 December 2010, available at: <<https://mea.gov.in>>.

10. Press Information Bureau Government of India, Ministry of Finance, 24 June 2018, available at: <<http://pib.nic.in>>.

11. Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan", 28 April 2018, available at: <<https://mea.gov.in>>.

thirty years. It takes great discipline to achieve this, a strategic discipline that is a result of Sun Tzu's famous strategic advice: "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."¹²

To be fair, it should also be recorded here that many Asian states, especially the ASEAN states, have been inspired by the modern example of the European Union (EU). The greatest civilizational achievement of the EU is not that there have been zero wars between any two EU member states. Instead, it is the *zero prospect* of war. Many Asian states are trying to replicate this European gold standard of peace in their relations with each other.

The great cultural Renaissance

If peace prevails in Asia, as it is likely to do, and if Asian economies continue to thrive, as they are very likely to do, the inevitable result is that Asian societies will begin to accumulate the material and human capabilities to rediscover their rich cultural heritage from which they were cut off during the turbulent and difficult 19th and 20th centuries. Many cultural masterpieces were destroyed or looted in these centuries. The world, especially the West, was horrified when the Taliban destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, which had survived fourteen centuries. Yet, when this happened, few in the West commented that, barely a hundred years earlier, British and French forces had behaved just like the Taliban in destroying and looting the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) of China in 1860. As Swedish political scientist Erik Ringmar vividly describes:

"During forty-eight hours the Yuanmingyuan was subjected to 'an orgiastic rampage of looting'. The soldiers destroyed vases and mirrors, tore down paintings and scrolls, broke into the storehouse of silks and used the precious fabrics for tying up their horses; they draped themselves in the empress's robes, and stuffed their pockets full of rubies, sapphires, pearls and pieces of crystal rock. [...] Finally, on 18 October, the British commander, James Bruce, the eighth earl of Elgin [...] ordered the Yuanmingyuan to be burnt to the ground. During the subsequent two days, groups of soldiers were dispatched around the grounds to set fire to the various palaces, pagodas and other buildings. A particular loss was the imperial library and archive, which contained some 10,500 volumes, including the rarest and most beautiful works on Chinese history, science, philosophy and the arts. Since many of the buildings were made of cedar-wood they burned

12. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, p.77.

well and for days an aromatic smoke filled the sky over Beijing's northern suburbs. The Anglican pastor to the British army, Robert McGhee, wrote, 'No eye will ever again see this testimony to the artistic talents and tastes of another era.' Yet there was no remorse. 'Save not one, no not one building. Let there be no remnants of the palace. Now let us return to Beijing, the good work is done.'¹³

It is useful to record this episode as it will explain a significant difference between Asian and European perspectives on the 19th and 20th centuries. Most Europeans look back with nostalgia at these centuries as their power and influence grew and grew in this period. By contrast, for most Asian societies, with the possible exception of Japan, these centuries were difficult and painful. On the other hand, when Asians view the 21st century, they look ahead with great optimism because most of them have no doubt that the 21st century will be better for them than the previous two centuries.

This deep optimism, combined with steady and positive economic performance, will lead to greater investment in the cultural spheres. When future historians look for events that signaled the arrival of the Asian century, they could well point to the spectacular opening of the Beijing Olympics on August 8th 2008. For the Chinese, the number eight is the most auspicious number. The launch of the Olympics on this triple-eight date gave them a powerful boost in confidence.

Most Europeans cannot see rising Asian cultural confidence

This dimension of rising Asian cultural confidence is one that most Europeans cannot, for obvious reasons, see or experience. However, I have experienced it directly and powerfully. When I was born in Singapore in 1948, Singapore was a British colony. It was also a poor colony. Our per capita income in 1965, the year Singapore became an independent nation, was US\$500, the same as Ghana in Africa. All through our childhood in Singapore, we experienced, as Asians, a deep sense of cultural inferiority to Westerners. We were made to believe, directly or indirectly, that we were inferior human beings. Several Asian scholars have commented on this inferiority complex. The Indian scholar, Ashis Nandy, for example, has described the colonization of the Asian mind as one that "survives the demise of empires".¹⁴

13. E. Ringmar, "Liberal Barbarism and the Oriental Sublime: The European Destruction of the Emperor's Summer Palace", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2006, pp. 921-922.

14. A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, xi.

In the 21st century, few Asians feel this sense of inferiority. Instead, their cultural pride has exploded. The extraordinary performance of Asian students, especially Chinese and Indian, in leading global universities, including Harvard and Yale, has boosted this self-confidence. One American university, the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), admits students on pure merit. It has no ethnic quotas. Asian-Americans make up 5.8% of the American population¹⁵ but make up 40% of the 2018-2019 incoming class of Caltech.

In the past, most Asian students who succeeded in American universities would stay on in the US. As a result of the success of Asian societies, many are returning home. Many in the West believe that young Chinese students who have experienced the academic freedom of Western universities would not want to return home. This was true one or two decades ago. Now most are returning home. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, between 1978 and 2017, “the number of students returning from overseas studies, especially high-caliber graduates, has been growing steadily. In total, 3,132,000 students or 83.73% of all students pursuing further studies abroad returned to China after graduation.”¹⁶

In short, the most powerful testimonial to the resurgence of Asia is the degree to which Asians are voting with their feet. For a large part of the 20th century, mainly Asians who aimed to succeed dreamt of migrating to successful Western societies to find a better life for themselves and their families. Now, they want to participate in the great Asian resurgence. However, even while they reconnect with their own cultural heritage, they will not abandon what they have learnt from the West. One little-known fact about China is that it is now producing 50 to 100 million Western classical musicians, including a remarkable number of today’s top musicians such as instrumentalists Yundi Li, Yuja Wang and Wang Jian, conductors Yu Long and Zhang Xian, and composers Tan Dun, Guo Wenjing, Ye Xiaogang and Chen Yi. It is also building more Western concert halls and opera theatres than any other country.

This is, therefore, the great hope that the spectacular return of Asia provides to the world. The rejuvenation of Asian societies will not lead to a clash of civilizations as predicted by Samuel P. Huntington. Instead, as former US Treasury Secretary Professor Lawrence Summers and I predicted

15. US Census 2018, see at: <www.census.gov>.

16. See more at: <<http://en.moe.gov.cn>>.

in an article we co-authored in *Foreign Affairs*, the resurgence of Asia will lead to a fusion of civilizations. As we said, “despite the daily headlines that scream doom and gloom, the world is actually coming together, not falling apart. So far, the fusion of civilizations has been driven primarily by the injection of Western DNA into other civilizations. Over time, the flow of culture and ideas is likely to go in both directions.”¹⁷



Keywords

Asia
Economic development
Geopolitical balance
Clash of civilizations

17. K. Mahhubani and L. H. Summers, “The Fusion of Civilizations: The Case for Global Optimism”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3, May-June 2016.

