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A Rudderless World

By KISHORE MAHBUBANI

SINGAPORE — The demand for global leadership has never been greater. The world is truly lost in trying to find a way out of the current crisis. America is imploding. Europe is crumbling. London is burning. The Arab Spring has lost direction. China and India remain internally preoccupied. If ever there were a moment for a global leader to step up, this is it. So why is no leader emerging?

First, the world has changed structurally, yet our systems for managing global affairs have not adapted. In the past, when the billions of citizens of planet earth lived in separated countries, it was like having an ocean of separate boats. Hence, the postwar order created rules to ensure that the boats did not collide; it created rules for cooperation.

Up until now, this arrangement has worked well. World War III did not follow World Wars I and II. But today the world's seven billion citizens no longer live in separate boats. They live in more than 190 cabins on the same boat. Each cabin has a government to manage its affairs. And the boat as a whole moves along without a captain or a crew.

The world is adrift.

The G-20 was set up to provide global leadership at the height of the latest financial crisis. The group came together in London in early 2009 to save the global economy. However, as soon as the crisis receded, the G-20 leaders retreated into their cabins again.

To make matters worse, some nations have become unmanageable. Just look at the United States.

The best candidate for global leader is, of course, Barack Obama. No leader gets as much global press coverage as Obama does. But he has no time to save the world. This summer a tiny group of crazy Tea Party congressmen held him, the United States and the world hostage.

In the next 14 months, Obama will only focus on his reelection. The world will not matter. Sadly, no European leader seems ready to fill this vacuum. Nor is there a Chinese or Indian leader willing to step up. Our global boat will continue to drift in the coming months.

The second reason no global leader has emerged: The geopolitics of the world are running at cross purposes with the geoeconomics of the world. Geoeconomics requires consensus; countries coming together. In geopolitics, we are experiencing the greatest power shifts we have seen in centuries. Power is shifting from West to East. All this creates deep insecurity in the established powers. They want to cling on to privileges acquired from previous days of glory.

Only this can explain the rush by Europe to reclaim the headship of International Monetary Fund when Dominique Strauss-Kahn stepped down. No one doubts that Christine Lagarde is a competent administrator. But is it wise for Europe to cling on to old privileges when power is shifting? And is it wise to choose a noneconomist to run the most important economics organization at a time of economic turmoil? A secure Europe may have ceded power graciously. An insecure Europe clings to privileges.

Third, political leadership is always preceded by intellectual leadership. For several decades, the Western intelligentsia provided this intellectual leadership. Indeed, they used to happily lecture the world on what should be done. Today, they are clearly lost.

As an Asian, I used to be regularly lectured by Westerners on the inability of Asians to slay their sacred cows. Today, the Western intelligentsia seems equally afraid to attack their own sacred cows. Surely, after the damage done by the Tea Party episode, an obvious question to ask is: Have democracies become dysfunctional? Have special interest groups distorted the global agenda? Should some of them be disbanded?

Sadly, the parameters of intellectual discourse in the West have become narrower and narrower. Short-term political fights take precedence over long term strategic decisions. Only one phrase captures the current Asian perception of the West: sheer incredulity.

How could the best preachers on political courage and economic discipline in the world display none of it when the hour came?

In short, we are not going to get any great global leadership soon. And if we continue to drift, we will at least know why.

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