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Asian nations grow more confident, more optimistic, even as the US withdraws from global leadership, fearful after the 9/11 attacks and lashing out in anger like a wounded animal, without plans or purpose. By condoning torture and instigating war while overlooking pressing problems, the US has abandoned lofty principles it once embraced. With that context, former Singapore ambassador to the United Nations, Kishore Mahbubani, offers predictions about the direction India is likely to take as an emerging power: The country will retain its cultural pride and not shy away from its clothing styles or cultural traditions. Likewise, India will show diminished interest in the West. The country will retain democracy, respect for human rights and other values, but apply those values in the context of its own history and culture. Finally, India will continue striving for inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. As such, India may once again act as a bridge for multiple cultures – and show that as a major power it does not stand alone, but can cooperate fruitfully with the rest of the world.

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India: Emerging as Eastern or Western Power?

India can follow in the footsteps of Japan or China – or even forge its own path

Kishore Mahbubani
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SINGAPORE: Pundits agree: India will be the third great Asian power to emerge, after Japan and China. Japan emerged self-consciously as a Western power. China has made no pretensions in that direction. What will be India's path?



Showing true colors: A confident India stands up and doesn't follow anybody's model

Figuring India's direction is not easy. What is the nature of era we are living in, Eastern or Western? Also what is the nature of Indian civilization itself?

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era of human history. Japan emerged as a Western power because there seemed to be no alternative to Western power in 1868. Japanese Meiji reformer Yukichi Fukuzawa said: "Our immediate policy, therefore, should be to lose no time in waiting for the enlightenment of our neighbouring countries in order to join them in developing Asia, but rather to depart from their ranks and cast our lot with the civilized countries of the West."¹ Sun Yat Sen also acknowledged superiority of the West: "We, the modern people of China, are all useless, but if in the future we use Western civilization as a model, we can easily turn weakness into strength, and the old into the new."²

Similarly, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said: "The search for the sources of India's strength and for her deterioration and decay is long and intricate. Yet the recent causes of that decay are obvious enough. She fell behind in the march of technique, and Europe, which had long been backward in many matters, took the lead in technical progress."³ Would these Asian statesmen, if alive today, readily acknowledge the superiority of the West?

Many in the West have never felt so insecure, both in their daily lives and sense of future. Remarkably, one man sitting in a cave in Afghanistan has unleashed much of this insecurity. A few young English Muslims aggravated it further. Lou Dobbs has convinced many Americans that outsourcing to Asia is the next big threat to America. Europeans, by contrast, feel threatened when a British citizen of Indian ancestry, Lakshmi Mittal, tries to buy a European steel company, all the while playing by European rules. All these are examples of insecurity.

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If the Goldman Sachs BRICs study is accurate, three of the four largest economies in the year 2050 will be Asian: China, USA, Indian and Japan. It is hard to engage in Western

triumph if this triumph does not rest on a conviction of perpetually superior economic performance.

Something equally important has occurred in the moral dimension. If anyone had suggested 15 years ago that Western countries would allow the use of torture, he would have been dismissed out of hand. But this has happened. In 2005, Irene Khan, the head of the Amnesty International, said: “Guantanamo is the gulag of our times.” If her statement was untrue, there should have been a rush of denials from the West. If her statement was true, an equally strong chorus of voices would have demanded that this had to stop. Apart from a few flutters of regret, nothing really happened. The gulag continued.

This silence of the West has resulted in a profound shift in how leading Asian minds view the West. Instead of seeing the West as a paragon of virtue, they now see an emperor with no moral clothing.

The good news here is that many of these “Western” values may not be uniquely Western, and other custodians could emerge.

The West believes that it alone championed “freedom” and “tolerance.” But Amartya Sen points to the Indian emperor Ashoka, “who during the third century BCE covered the country with inscriptions on stone tablets about good behaviour and wise governance, including a demand for basic freedoms for all – indeed, he did not exclude women and slaves as Aristotle did.”⁴

Sen’s point is that the great divide between the East and West may be artificial, that the values of freedom and tolerance, reason and logic, may not be uniquely Western.

Against this backdrop, let me offer concrete predictions about how India will emerge:

My first prediction is that Indians, unlike the Japanese, are going to wear less rather than more Western clothing. Clothing helps define one’s identity. Try to imagine another Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru without their trademark Indian garb.

Second, India will gradually drift away from the West. The West will continue to lose the magical place it has enjoyed in the global imagination. Part of this is will be a result of relative economic performance. There was a time when many Asians believed that Westerners were inherently superior. Today, the cultural confidence of Asians is immense. Most people in the West have not noticed this because cultural confidence is intangible. But Asians are fully aware, no longer amazed to see Asians top the lists of leading global entrepreneurs or academic achievers in leading American universities.

The great divide between the East and West may be artificial; the values of freedom and tolerance may not be uniquely Western.

But there is another practical reason why many in the West have not noticed the rising cultural confidence of Asians. Most Western opinions are generated by a small group of Western pundits – whether they be in “The New York Times” or “Financial Times.” A deep conviction of Western civilizational superiority seeps through their writings. Strangely enough, in our information-rich universe, Western voices continue to speak to other

Western voices on the basis of deep-seated assumptions of Western superiority, while the rest of the world drifts from these assumptions.

With the West losing its magical place in the human imagination, it is also likely that the desire to emulate the West will diminish in India and the rest of the world. India will continue with some of the finest political traditions it has inherited from the West: Democracy, a respect for human rights and respect for the rule of law. But increasingly, Indians will claim these traditions as their own, just as Western philosophers happily accepted the work of Islamic rationalists and claimed their ideas as their own.

My third prediction is that, with the growing detachment between the West and the rest, India will once again resume its natural role as the meeting point for the great civilizations. At a time when many in the West are convinced that the West cannot co-exist in peace with the Islamic world, they will increasingly marvel at how India has accommodated many civilizations – including the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian civilizations – and how most live in peace with one another most of the time.

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A spirit of inclusiveness pervades Indian political and social culture. While the West often tries to discuss the world in black-and-white terms, the Indian mind sees the nuances.

Take Iran as a case study. The West cannot see beyond the relatively new and brief theocratic rule of Iran. Indians however see a rich and deep Persian civilization that has contributed so much to the development of both Asian and Indian cultures. Hence, while the West insists on cutting itself off from Iran, Indians naturally believe in engagement, even though the Indian government disapproves of the Iranian nuclear program.

This capacity for engaging other cultures may well mean that India could play a bridging role between the West and the East. Or, it could play a bigger role of convincing leading Western minds that they should stop seeing themselves as guardians of one leading civilization. A great crusade is needed to convince the West that it is essentially no different from the rest. India may well play a leading role in this crusade.

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¹ Shunsaku, Nishikawa. 1993. "Fukuzawa Yukichi." Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education (UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 3/4, p.8. (The quote is from the article "Datsu-A Ron" (Leaving Asia) is published in Jiji-shimpo, 16 March 1885. The translation is by Sinh Vinh in Fukuzawa Yukichi nenkan [Annals], vol. 11, Mita, Tokyo, Fukuzawa

Yukichi kyokai, 1984.)

² "Zai dongjing zhongguo liuxuesheng huanying dahui de yanshuo" in Sun Zhongshan quanji, vol. 1, p. 278.

³ Jawaharlal Nehru, "The Discovery of India." New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980.

⁴ Amartya Sen, "The Argumentative Indian." London: Penguin Books, 2005, p. 284.

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