

The west is strategically wrong on Georgia

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Published: August 20 2008 19:19 | Last updated: August 20 2008 19:19

Sometimes small events can portend great changes. The Georgian fiasco may be one such event. It heralds the end of the post cold-war era. But it does not mark the return of any new cold war. It marks an even bigger return: the return of history.

The post cold-war era began on a note of western triumphalism, symbolised by Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History*. The title was audacious but it captured the western zeitgeist. History had ended with the triumph of western civilisation. The rest of the world had no choice but to capitulate to the advance of the west.

In Georgia, Russia has loudly **declared** that it will no longer capitulate to the west. After two decades of humiliation Russia has decided to snap back. Before long, other forces will do the same. As a result of its overwhelming power, the west has intruded into the geopolitical spaces of other dormant countries. They are no longer dormant, especially in Asia.

Indeed, most of the world is bemused by western moralising on Georgia. America would not tolerate Russia intruding into its geopolitical sphere in Latin America. Hence Latin Americans see American double standards clearly. So do all the Muslim commentaries that note that the US invaded Iraq illegally, too. Neither India nor China is moved to protest against Russia. It shows how isolated is the western view on Georgia: that the world should support the underdog, Georgia, against Russia. In reality, most support Russia against the bullying west. The gap between the western narrative and the rest of the world could not be greater.

It is therefore critical for the west to learn the right lessons from Georgia. It needs to think strategically about the limited options it has. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, western thinkers assumed the west would never need to make geopolitical compromises. It could dictate terms. Now it must recognise reality. The combined western population in North America, the European Union and Australasia is 700m, about 10 per cent of the world's population. The remaining 90 per cent have gone from being objects of world history to subjects. The Financial Times headline of August 18 2008 proclaimed: **"West in united front over Georgia"**. It should have read: "Rest of the world faults west on Georgia". Why? A lack of strategic thinking.

Mao Zedong, for all his flaws, was a great strategic thinker. He said China always had to deal with its primary contradiction and compromise with its secondary contradiction. When the Soviet Union became the primary contradiction, Mao settled with the US, even though it involved the humiliation of dealing with a power that then recognised Chiang Kai-shek as the legitimate ruler. The west must emulate Mao's pragmatism and focus on its primary contradiction.

Russia is not even close to becoming the primary contradiction the west faces. The real strategic choice is whether its primary challenge comes from the Islamic world or China. Since September 11 2001, the west has acted as though the Islamic world is the primary challenge. Yet rather than devise a long-term strategy to win over 1.2bn Muslims, the west has jumped into the Islamic world with no strategy. Hence there are looming failures in Afghanistan and Iraq and an even more hostile environment in the Islamic world.

Many European thinkers are acutely aware of the folly of many US policies. But they are reluctant to confront the dangers of outsourcing their security to US power. In security, geography trumps culture. Because of geography, Europe has to worry about Islamic anger. Because of the Atlantic Ocean, the US has less reason to do so.

In the US, leading neo-conservative thinkers see China as their primary contradiction. Yet they also support Israel with a passion, without realising this stance is a geopolitical gift to China. It guarantees the US faces a hostile Islamic universe, distracting it from focusing on China. There is no doubt China was the bigger winner of 9/11. It has stabilised its neighbourhood, while the US has been distracted.

Western thinkers must decide where the real long-term challenge is. If it is the Islamic world, the US should stop intruding into Russia's geopolitical space and work out a long-term engagement with China. If it is China, the US must win over Russia and the Islamic world and resolve the Israel-Palestine issue. This will enable Islamic governments to work more closely with the west in the battle against al-Qaeda.

The biggest paradox facing the west is that it is at last possible to create a safer world order. The number of

countries wanting to become "responsible stakeholders" has never been higher. Most, including China and India, want to work with the US and the west. But the absence of a long-term coherent western strategy towards the world and the inability to make geopolitical compromises are the biggest obstacles to a stable world order. Western leaders say the world is becoming a more dangerous place, yet few admit that their flawed thinking is bringing this about. Georgia illustrates the results of a lack of strategic thinking.

The writer, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (National University of Singapore), has just published 'The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East'

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