

Opinion **Geopolitics**

It's time for the west and the rest to talk to each other as equals

We live in an interdependent world which faces many pressing common challenges

KISHORE MAHBUBANI



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Kishore Mahbubani DECEMBER 12 2023

The writer, a distinguished fellow at the National University of Singapore, is the author of [‘The Asian 21st Century’](#)

It’s no secret that the west captured the imagination and respect of the rest of the world for centuries. However, what is a secret — because it is happening silently and invisibly in the minds of billions — is that the west is now losing this respect.

It wasn’t western values that made the west pre-eminent, but performance. Superior performance enabled the comparatively small population of the west to pull ahead of the rest of humanity for 200 years and to use its technological superiority to colonise all corners of the globe. It’s hard to believe that barely 100 years ago, 100,000 Englishmen could effectively rule over 300mn Indians. Despite the well-founded resentments of the postcolonial era, the global south’s respect for western outperformance was real and enduring.

In the postwar period in particular, most western societies were stable and well-ordered, enjoying both consensual democracies and sustained economic growth. Their leaders, even when not inspiring, were sensible. As the American diplomat George Kennan wisely predicted, it would be the “spiritual vitality” of the west that would ultimately defeat the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, if Kennan were alive today, he would struggle to find similar vitality. Incompetence has replaced competence. Societies that were once well-ordered have become deeply troubled and politically volatile — Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump and other populist leaders are clear signs of it. Many western intellectuals see this, but persuade themselves that these are merely temporary, cyclical challenges.

They are, however, not cyclical, but structural. Take, for example, a statistic that every European leader should commit to memory: from 2010 to 2020, the Asean bloc of south-east Asian nations, with its \$3tn gross domestic product, contributed more to global economic growth than the EU with its \$17tn GDP.

Economic incompetence, which will persist as long as western leaders remain reluctant to impose on their own populations the kind of bitter medicine they have long imposed on underperforming developing economies, has now been matched by geopolitical incompetence. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was illegal and has rightly been condemned. Yet 85 per cent of the world's population live in countries that have not imposed sanctions on Russia. Does this indicate Russian isolation? Or the opposite?

It is true that on Ukraine, the US, at least, has shown geopolitical cunning rather than incompetence, creating European dependence on Washington at a time when the Americans want to rally support for applying greater pressure on China. Yet the US may come to find that these geopolitical dividends turn out to be temporary. Russia could still collapse under combined western pressure, although this seems increasingly unlikely. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's president, may have to accept a painful compromise. And if that is the outcome, the non-western countries will ask, 'What was the point of it all?'

The massive amounts of aid sent to Ukraine only confirmed the growing belief in the global south that the west doesn't really care for it. Significantly, the Russian invasion took place while memories were still fresh of the Covid pandemic, during which the global south saw a surplus of vaccines in the west that was not shared with them.

Most haunting of all for governments in that region is the possibility that Trump could return to power. And if he does it will be a nastier and angrier Trump who will tear up the climate accords again, ignore the UN and use American power to bully other countries bilaterally

Even with the best social science tools at its disposal, the American establishment still can't figure out the sources of the anger that is leading so many Americans to vote for Trump. A *Financial Times* headline last week put it bluntly: "Why is the US so unpopular?"

lump. A bitterly divided society can no longer serve as the shining city on the hill for the rest of the world.

All of which is to say that something profound is happening in the world — a kind of metaphysical detachment of the west from the rest.

Where many people in the rest of the world once saw the west as the answer to their problems, they now realise that they will have to find their own way. But does this mean a total decoupling of the west and the rest is inevitable? Absolutely not. We still live in an interdependent world which faces many pressing common global challenges.

We have to talk to each other. But we must do so as equals. The condescension must end. The time has come for a dialogue based on mutual respect between the west and the rest.

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