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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

HERE is an ongoing debate in the global analytical community as to whom the 21st century belong. There is said to be a consensus that the United States is in "elegant decline", as Robert Kaplan would have us believe, and that, in this post-American period, the great story is "the rise of the rest", as Fareed Zakaria has powerfully argued.

Some would hold that this "dichotomy" of the world between the US and the rest is too lopsided. Also, "the rest" requires a sharper definition. Professor Kishore Mahbubani inserts himself eloquently into the discussions by suggesting that for "the rest", read "Asia", through his extremely lucid tome *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift Of Global Power To The East*.

So is Asia to be the new Rome to America's Greece?

Many Asians hope so. It imparts them a sense of pride that they have longed for. They believe it will make up for their having missed out on the fillip to civilisation provided to the West by the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution, partly on account of their lethargy and partly – and this is a view much prevalent among Asian intellectuals – due to the fact that for much of the period through those phenomena they were under colonial domination.

However, this does not explain why Asia was conquered so easily by the Europeans in the first place. How could a few hundred English soldiers under Lord Clive defeat Nawab Sirajuddowla of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa at Plassey in 1757 or how did the mighty Moghuls of Delhi eventually succumb to the British onslaught a century thereafter?

So there was something terribly wrong with Asia. Asians had lost the leadership in thought and ideas, and perhaps after having translated Aristotle and Plato, and having their works fall into European hands after the sack of Constantinople in 1453, Asian minds ceased to stimulate the world, be it in science, politics or later economics. And ideas rule the world, as Italian statesman Guiseppe Mazzini had said in the 19th century.

Professor Amartya Sen speaks of a misconception nourished by some that India, or South Asia, is the land of uncritical faiths and unquestioned practices. He

# Does the 21st century belong to Asia?



speaks of some cultural theorists, "allegedly highly sympathetic" who are happy to demonstrate the strength and the superiority of the faith-based and unreasoning culture of India and the East, in contrast to the "shallow rationalism" and scientific priorities of the West.

Prof Sen asserts that even if this line of argument were inspired by sympathy, it ends up suppressing large parts of the subcontinent's intellectual heritage. In his *The Argumentative Indian: Writings On Indian History, Culture And Identity*, he shows the role pluralism and the dialogic tradition of the land play in supporting de-

mocracy, secularism and the pursuit of mathematics and science.

The current global recession and the accompanying dizzying economic successes of India and China have spurred Asian confidence, as did the earlier economic miracles of Japan and East Asia, like South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore had done.

Asian spirits are currently buoyant. Politicians, academics and analysts are abuzz with talk that the Asian century is already here.

The truth is: It is not yet. In a recent article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Minxin

Pei urged calm upon this over-enthusiasm. Making his point that per capita Asian gross domestic product (GDP) is US\$5,800 (S\$8,410) compared to US\$48,000 in the United States, he argued that it will take the average Asian 77 years to equal the income of the average American. The Chinese and the Indian would need 47 and 123 years, respectively.

The fact remains, however, that the world is indeed on the cusp of great changes and much of it is emanating from Asia. It is not a question of cut-throat competition but cooperation with the US.

The flip-side of America's success story is that there is no salvation for those who cannot make the grade.

The Asian tale must be one of growth with equity. This would be in consonance with the Asian value of the responsibility of those who govern. This is why the report in the *Financial Times* of June 25 that found India having 50 billionaires (in US dollars) controlling wealth equivalent to 20 per cent of GDP and 80 per cent of the stock market capitalisation was so disturbing.

There is a prevalent Asian value, irrespective of ideologies, that those who rule should take care of those they rule. If there are gaps in their capability to do so, then other private or civil agencies must be facilitated to undertake those tasks. That is the origin of Professor Mohammed Yunus' "Grameen" movement involving micro-credit in Bangladesh or the "Edhi Foundation" of Abdus Sattar Edhi in Pakistan, or Mother Teresa's Home in India.

In many of these countries, the state seeks to "walk on two legs". It tries to follow market principles on the one hand, and spread the social safety net on the other. Corruption in many countries remains an impediment, though, and must be addressed.

This could be Asia's great contribution to human civilisation, the simultaneous and comprehensive advancement of society and the individual, helping to create harmony rather than friction.

In an essay entitled *America's Edge: Power In A Networked Century* in *Foreign Affairs* of January-February 2009, Anne-Marie Slaughter turned all the above arguments on their heads and affirmed that this century will be an American one because of its unparalleled "connectedness".

But then, how long must this argument continue?

We may conclude that the century and futurity must belong to the totality of humankind, drawing upon the United States' skills, Europe's reason and Asia's spirituality, even though no region of the world can claim complete ownership to any one of these attributes singly, also ensuring that no one, not even deep in the heartland of Africa, is left behind.

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