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The United States and the State of World Politics: Some Implications for South Asia

This essay attempts to answer several important questions: What is happening to the political systems in the Western world? How will America influence the state of world politics as it goes through a period of wrenching change itself? At this time, Washington seems less inclined to get involved in world politics. What would be the impact of this virtual withdrawal from world affairs on several parts of Asia, the northeast, the east, the southeast, the south and the west? How closely are economic and political trends aligned? Would economic despair among several segments of the citizenry in the West reinforce the passive approach which the politically more-developed countries have adopted towards the countries that are relatively less-advanced.

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Introduction

President Barack Obama, now in the final few months of his eight-year stewardship, has come out firmly against the United States using its preferred designs for the building of

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political structures around the globe. He is being a realist. After the American success in politically developing the nations that the United States and its allies had defeated in the Second World War, it was obvious to Obama, fighting wars was not the way to bring liberal democracy to the politically less-developed countries around the globe. In fact, there were a number of political problems that America faced as it got engaged in finding a successor to Obama. The process now under way may cause America to withdraw behind its own walls. Also, it no longer seems likely that one political ideology would prevail. For reasons of history, culture and experience, countries around the world will be governed in several different ways.

We notice that history was a major determinant of political developments during the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century thus far. We see this as we move through the Asian continent and go from the northeast, to the east, to the southeast, to the south and finally to the west. Each of these rather distinct political regions was deeply influenced by what the conquerors and the colonizers left behind. Wars fought and lost brought democratic rule to the northeast – to Japan. Internal upheavals and bitter memories of involvement with colonial powers gave the east authoritarian rule – South Korea (initially), and China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (more durably). The southeast followed the route of rapid economic development before moving on to political liberalization and modernization. Even then, the political systems remain tinged with authoritarianism in parts of Southeast Asia. The south – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – was deeply influenced by the long domination of Britain. The countries in the region were impressed with the way Britain had developed politically. It borrowed heavily from Britain's political system. Finally, the west continued to struggle with the after-effects of short-lived colonial rule, if not direct rule – contacts with Europe. It is now dealing with the rise of the militant version of Islam – most of the Arab Middle East, but also in different ways, Iran and Afghanistan. Economists have a term for the no-to-be doubted influence of history on development. They call it path dependence.

America, in spite of many attempts made after the end of the Second World War, has not succeeded in exporting its political system to other countries. The attempts were mostly aimed at establishing liberal democratic orders, and not at installing in other places the

institutions that defined the country's own political system. These were based on a strong belief in a government elected by the people, a relatively small and non-intrusive state, and the rule of law. These three principles of governance were embedded in the American executive, the judiciary, and the legislature. The United States succeeded in developing political systems in other parts of the world where some of the fundamentals were present, as was the case in Germany and Italy, the two countries America had fought and defeated in the Second World War. It also succeeded in bringing democracy to places that were socially and economically advanced enough for their citizens to demand the creation of representative forms of government. This was the case with Japan as it surrendered to the United States in 1945. Washington had less success in those areas where history and economic and social development did not lay the ground for political advancement. This was the case in many politically backward countries of the world. As Daron Acemoglu and James Robinsons have emphasized in their powerful book, *Why Nations Fail*, it is only when systems become economically “inclusive” that we can see the development of inclusive political systems. For them, economic inclusiveness means reasonable economic and wealth equality. Political inclusiveness means representative forms of government with checks and balances and the rule of law.²

As President Barack Obama nears the end of his tenure, he has concluded that the task of political development was better left to the people themselves. Instead, the United States should focus its attention on making its own system inclusive. This message came to be called the “Obama Doctrine” by several analysts and historians who have studied the Obama era.

Wars and Political Development: The Stories of ‘Five Asias’

The United States undertook major nation-building efforts immediately after winning the Second World War. Its leadership had come to the conclusion that one way of preventing

² Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York, Crown Books, 2012.

future conflagrations that did so much damage in the first half of the 20th century was to move towards liberal democratic orders in the countries it had fought and defeated. Germany and Japan were provided with new political systems crafted mostly by experts from the United States. That was particularly the case with Japan since its monarchical system was the farthest from the liberal democratic structures that had developed in Europe and the United States.

Japan had to be forced to go the Western way after it surrendered on 16 August 1946. In the immediate post-war period it attempted to develop a new political order that was not much different from the one that took it to war. That move was not acceptable to General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. He ordered the drafting of a much different document which was delivered to the government, debated by the newly-elected Diet and came into effect on 3 May 1947, less than two years after the country's surrender. It included the Imperial Rescript of 1 January 1946, in which the emperor renounced the doctrine of imperial divinity. At the time of the adoption of the new Constitution, the provision that drew most attention was Article 9 which renounced Japan's right to war-making and maintenance of a military. In addition to the democratic system embedded in the constitution and the commitment not to remilitarize, were two other provisions in the political order that the Americans had created. The first was land reform that ended the system of tenancy and distributed land to individual farmers. This helped to move the centre of gravity of political power from the large landed estates in the countryside to small and medium industrial and commercial enterprises in towns and cities. The second was the emancipation of women and strengthening of their legal and political rights. As noted later, all three – a democratic order, land reforms, and women's rights were to profoundly affect developments in East Asia.

America fought its second Asian war shortly after the end of the Second World War. This was in the Korean Peninsula. The United States was successful in mobilizing the United Nations to counter the invasion of South Korea by North Korea. The Korean War was fought from 1950 to 1953 and involved 16 UN member countries to save the South from being run over by the North. The Americans lost 35,000 men in the battlefield, and even when the peace agreement was signed, they kept a sizeable force in South Korea. However,

Washington made no attempt to influence the political development of the country it had saved from Communism. It took time and rapid economic development before authoritarian rule gave way to a fully representative form of government. The next post-Second World War conflict involving the United States was in Vietnam, a country that had lived under colonial rule for decades. As France weakened, the Vietnamese elite wished to go the Chinese way. A powerful Communist Party had taken deep roots in the country's North Vietnamese soil. Its attempt to move south – from Hanoi to Saigon – resulted in a bitter civil war. The Americans, fearing the spread of Communism, joined the South's efforts to stop the North from advancing to the South. The Americans lost the struggle. This was the first time the United States lost a war. As discussed below, two more losses were to follow. The circumstances in which the war ended in Vietnam did not permit any kind of political involvement by the United States. The country developed its own system of governance dominated by one political party.

In the late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century, wars fought by the United States provided Washington with opportunities to mould the political systems of both Iraq and Afghanistan. These efforts were, at best, limited successes. An important lesson could be drawn from America's experience in Iraq and Afghanistan: that development of liberal democratic orders in those societies in which people lead their lives according to tribal traditions is a difficult task. Tribalism is essentially a deeply established authoritarian system in which power flows down from the top to the bottom. Tribes are essentially socially and religiously cohesive. They cannot and do not accommodate minorities. A good part of the liberal order is the grant of equal rights to minorities. This has not happened even in the United States, where the arrival of the movement "Black Lives Matter" suggests that even in that country, the development of a political order is a work-in-progress. In Iraq, disrespect for the rights of minorities led to the aggrieved Sunni population to lend support to the rise of the brutal Islamic State. In Afghanistan, the system created by the United States and its allies by way of the Bonn Agreement of 2002 did not enable the central authority in Kabul to establish its rule over the provinces. Even elections did not produce governments that could be said to have legitimacy. John Kerry, the United States Secretary of State, had to personally intervene to have the flawed presidential election of 2014 produce a successor to Hamid Karzai who had served as President for 12 years after the

Bonn agreement. Secretary Kerry's involvement produced a power-sharing arrangement between the two contenders that was, at best, tenuous.

To some extent the political and economic development of Southeast Asia was influenced by the social changes that followed the Second World War and the war in the Korean Peninsula. The wars dismantled the old structures; reduced the hold of traditional elites over the citizenry; enfranchised new groups, including women; and created political and economic spaces into which the new groups could move in. The war-created social transformation set the stage for rapid economic change and modernization such as what happened in the continent's northeast. The Southeast Asian nations adopted the model of economic growth that worked with great success in Korea and Taiwan. An intelligent but limited use of the state to guide private enterprises produced rapidly-growing export-oriented economies. The state proposed and private enterprise disposed. This model trickled down to Southeast nations. Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore also became "miracle economies" – a term used by the World Bank in an important 1993 study. Now Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and to a limited extent Myanmar are also following the same path.³

The South Asian political and economic story also revolves around conquests and wars. Fighting minor wars over several decades, the British eventually extended their hold over the entire subcontinent. They brought their political and economic management systems that brought modernity to the region. Whether India and the neighbouring South Asian states would have developed the way they did is one of the "What Ifs?" questions of history. But war and occupation had consequences. In this part of the continent, India adopted and then moulded the British systems to meet its needs, a process well explained by the political-philosopher Subrata Mitra.⁴ Two factors helped India move forward while other states in the region languished in the political wilderness. The country's Independence movement was led by two powerful individuals with deep roots in liberal politics. There were many differences in the approaches followed by Mahatma Gandhi, India's spiritual leader, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the nation's first Prime Minister. However, both believed in

³ The World Bank, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy*, Washington DC, 1993.

⁴ Subrata Kumar Mitra, *Politics in India: Structure, Process and Policy*, London, Routledge, 2011.

inclusive politics with “inclusiveness” given different meanings by the two men. They were helped by a political party which started its life as the All-India Congress Party during the time of the British and was committed to reaching out to all communities that lived in the vast subcontinent. Occupying the top rung of the leadership structure in the party were men such as B R Ambedkar, a member of the Untouchable Caste who became the main author of the Indian Constitution. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a devout Muslim, who served as the President of the Congress Party.

Would these divergent political systems have converged after the end of the ideological conflict between the West and other political systems? The “end of the history” celebration by Francis Fukuyama in his best-selling book of that title turned out to be premature.⁵ It became clear soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of European Communism that, these developments would not mean the world was going to opt for liberal democracy as the ideal form of governance. Competing ideologies arrived, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and reformed authoritarianism in parts of East Asia. Governments in Africa continued to be dominated mostly by strong men who worked mostly for their personal interests or the interests of their families and friends. In Latin America, elections brought populist governments to the fore. Latin America also saw the coming of political age of the area’s indigenous populations. They had long been suppressed by the descendants of those who arrived from the Iberian Peninsula to colonize the region. It was in South Asia, however, that liberal democracy advanced, bringing into its fold countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan that had deviated for years from the democratic path. India served as an example for the rest of South Asia. Did the United States contribute to South Asia’s democratic development? The answer is: very little if at all. How much did the United States help in liberating many parts of the developing world from authoritarian rule? The answer is less certain. What about the future? There is reason to worry about the role a changed America might play in the world’s political development.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

The US and the Future of Politics in Other Countries

No matter which of the two principal candidates contesting the presidential election in the United States makes it to office, it is unlikely that the country will be able – or willing – to project itself as the example of political development which the rest of the world should follow. The inclination for the US not to play that role on the global stage became the official policy during the Obama years. The President was more interested in promoting democracy and good governance at home than projecting America’s political values abroad. He was inclined not to get involved in nation-building abroad unlike George W Bush, his immediate predecessor. Obama was of the view that his country could set an example by successfully integrating into one national whole the diverse populations that constituted America. He made remarks to that effect to the US athletes he entertained in the White House on 29 September 2016. He used the opportunity to highlight the diversity of Team USA, saying that, like the nation itself, it is “more than the sum of its parts. There’s something special about that. All races, all faiths, all traditions, all orientations, all marching together under the same proud flag, not bound by a creed or color but by our devotion to an enduring set of ideals – that we are created equal, that we think and worship and love as we please and that we can pursue our own version of happiness. That’s a great gift; that’s what makes us strong.”⁶

Will the American detachment from the world’s political development, following deep involvement for several decades, influence global trends? This is not an easy question to answer. Global trends rest on many factors, of which the priorities of the US leadership is only one. That said, the findings of the Freedom House, a non-government organization, are worth noting. This international watchdog was founded some 75 years ago by Eleanor Roosevelt among others. In its most recent report, *Freedom in the World, 2016*, the institution has some dismal numbers to report. Over the past decade, the level of political freedom has declined in 105 countries and advanced only in 61. The last year was the worst yet, with 72 nations losing ground. Freedom House had always put much emphasis on

⁶ Dave Sheinin, “Obama greets Ledecy, Olympians at White House,” *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2016, p. D3.

independent press and media. It was discouraged by what it saw happening in the world. The institution noted that “press freedom declined to its lowest point in 12 years in 2015.”⁷

The liberal press in the United States was concerned about the sharp withdrawal by President Obama and his administration from the political advocacy role. When Obama campaigned for the presidency he often cited Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John F Kennedy as models whose work he would follow. In an article published in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* about the time he moved into White House he reminded the world that America “stood for and fought for the freedom sought by billions of people beyond our borders.” He promised that his administration would work towards “building just, secure, democratic societies in which citizens could “choose their leaders in climates free of fear.” But as noted by Fred Hiatt, the editorial page editor of *The Washington Post*, “democracy promotion faded as a goal once Obama moved into the White House. In negotiations with China, Iran, Cuba, and North Korea, human rights were never a priority. He apologized to Argentinians for America’s Cold War acceptance of its ‘dirty war,’ but overlooked similar or worse abuses in anti-terror allies such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia. He hoped that setting a good example at home – ending torture, closing (as he hoped to do) Guantanamo – would resonate overseas, but the results were disappointing.”⁸

How far the administration evolved from Obama’s 2007 declaration, Fred Hiatt believes, can be measured from an article by Vice President Joe Biden in the recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*. The Vice President “barely mentions democracy or human rights. Biden sets tasks for the next administration to achieve a ‘more peaceful and prosperous future,’ none explicitly related to freedom: deepening alliances in Asia and Western Hemisphere, addressing climate change and terrorism, improving ties with regional powers. Those are all important. But they will all be far more elusive if democracy continues to dwindle away.”

⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World, 2016: Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure*, Washington DC, 2016.

⁸ Fred Hiatt, “What the world could lose in America’s presidential election,” *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2016, p. A4.

Were Trump to win, he would further set back the democratic experiment in several parts of the world. He would undermine democracy by showing disrespect for democratic norms at home. In his many pronouncements, he has endorsed water-boarding, a recognized form of torture used by the Bush administration in its effort to obtain information from captured terrorists. He has disparaged freedom of the press, expelling from his rallies journalists who were critical of him. He undermined a free judiciary by declaring that a judge of Mexican origin could not be expected to handle the case against the Trump University. He made fun of the religion of Khizr Khan and his wife who had lost a son in Iraq while fighting for the United States. The way he spoke about the Khans further showed his hostility towards Muslims whose entry into the United States he said he would ban once he moved into the White House. He expressed open admiration for Russia's increasingly authoritarian ruler, President Vladimir Putin. If Trump makes it to the White House, it will be safe to predict that the world's political development would suffer.⁹

With America no longer the beacon of democratic light, some of the authoritarian systems of East Asia began to look attractive. China has made impressive strides in moving forward its economy, alleviating poverty and reducing regional and personal income inequalities. Vietnam, also under the rule of one authoritarian political party, is making impressive economic and social progress. With America focusing so much of its attention on preventing China from overwhelming its neighbours, a major realignment is taking place in Asia. Two examples should underscore this point: India, once proud of its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement, has pulled away from it to the extent that Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not attend the most recent NAM summit. Instead the Indian leader has made close relations with the United States the corner-stone of his foreign policy. The Philippines has moved in the opposite direction with President Roderigo Duterte seeking to break his country out of the US's orbit and signal to China that he is ready to negotiate closer ties after years of wrangling over its military presence in the South China Sea. The Filipino President was upset over the concerns expressed by Washington that he was following a ruthless campaign to eliminate the hold of drug-lords over some parts of the

⁹ The New York Times, "Why He Should Not be President," September 26, 2016.

country's economy. Foreign Minister Perfecto Yasay Jr, put his country's foreign policy approach in blunt terms. "Since the Philippines won independence from the United States, its former colonial master in 1946, the United States held on to invisible chains that reined us in toward dependency and submission as little brown brothers not capable of true independence and freedom," he wrote in a statement posted online."¹⁰ These were strong words penned by a senior official of a country that was once a close ally of the United States. This may not be the end of history but the beginning of an entirely new chapter.

Conclusion

The "end of history" excitement – the conclusion that with the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of European Communism, mankind had moved away from the ideological battles of the 20th century and settled down with Western democratic liberalism as the preferred mode of governance – proved to be overly optimistic. In the second decade of the 21st century, deep ideological divisions appeared in the West to suggest that large segments of the population were rejecting the established order and wanted it replaced with something that would better look after their interests. The Great Recession of 2008-09 left fairly large segments of the population economically distressed. Some of the problems these people faced were blamed on globalization, in particular on international trade. Ross Douthat, a conservative political thinker, believes that "the liberal system's weak spots did not go away. It delivered peace and order and prosperity, but it attenuated pre-liberal forces – tribal, familial, religious – that speak more deeply than consumer capitalism to basic human needs: the craving for honor, the yearning for community, the desire for metaphysical hope." Resistance to the established political order appeared. Its political form is angry nationalism, a revolt of the masses in both the United States and Europe. In the former it brought Donald Trump close to the apex of political power. In Europe it saw Brexit and the rise of several rightist parties in several European states. Douthat sees some developments in intellectual circles that are significant and even more important where many younger writers regard the liberal consensus as something to be transcended or

¹⁰ Quoted in Richard C. Paddock, "Behind bluster, a Philippine shift away from the U.S.," *The New York Times*, A4.

rejected, rather than reformed or redeemed. There are three separate movements taking shape. On the left are writers such as Thomas Piketty, Naomi Klein and Nehisi Coates who are exasperated with procedural liberalism and would like to find a more perfect justice than that produced by the post-Cold War order. On the opposite side are the new reactionaries - people, such as Michel Houellebecq and Pater Thiel. Their ultimate aim is regime change at home by displacing what Trump has called a rigged system and make the West great again. Finally, there is a third group: the religious dissenters. “These are Western Christians, especially, who regard both liberal and neo-Conservative style of politics as failed experiments, doomed because they sought reconciliation with a liberal project whose professed tolerance stacks the deck in favor of materialism and unbelief.”¹¹

How will Asia be affected by these changes in thinking in the West about political order? The Asians, in addition to dealing with the growing competition between China and the United States, are also looking at the various systems of governance that are currently in place in the continent. In the forgoing discussion I identified five Asian systems of governance that have evolved over time, each in response to the various intrusions by the West in different parts of the continent. What distinguishes them is the role of the state. Ultimately the choice is between an authoritarian state on the one side – this can be single party authoritarianism or the Islamic state – and a representative and inclusive state on the other. History would appear to be on the side of the latter, and here India and its neighbours could serve as models. India has produced a viable system of governance that has, by and large, accommodated a very-segmented society. It has also served as an example for such Muslim-majority countries as Bangladesh and Pakistan to follow. The systems evolving in these two Muslim nations could serve as guides for the politically-adrift countries in the Middle East.

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¹¹ Ross Douhat, “Among the post-liberals,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2016, p. 11.