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ASIAN DEMOCRACIES SHOULD BE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY

Masayuki Tadokoro

“For the first time in centuries, the West will have to come to terms with a seismic change happening about it,” Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister, who recently converted to Catholicism, said in explaining his belief in the importance of religious faith. “The East is rising. At the least it will demand parity with the West and perhaps more. But what values will this daunting new world use to guide it? I believe in this world of rapid globalization where power is shifting away from its traditional centre in the West, the world will be immeasurably poorer, more dangerous, more fragile and above all more

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aimless - I mean without the necessary sense of the purpose to guide on its journey - if it is without the strong spiritual dimension.” Blair apparently believes that the Catholic or Christian faith should underpin the “West” in meeting the challenges from the “East”.

From a Japanese perspective, opposing the “West” and the “East” and representing the “West” by Christianity sounds surprisingly anachronistic and somewhat puzzling. I wonder if Blair did not know that there are a huge number of Christians in the “East”. In fact, Christians in India outnumber those in the UK. It is well known that former Japanese Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira and former South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung were both committed Christians. In both countries, where the separation of politics and religion is an established practice, their leaders being Christian does not seem to have bothered people in these “Eastern” countries. Would Blair advise Japanese and Koreans to be alarmed by that as a daunting challenge from the “West”?

What is the “East”? Is there such a thing as the East in the first place? The “East” literally can mean the huge area stretching beyond Turkey all the way through Japan and containing at least three major traditional civilizations: Islamic, Indian and Chinese. It has always been the home of a majority population on this planet who have dauntingly different religions, cultures, traditions, and political systems, as well as levels of economic development. Does it really make sense to talk about the “East” except in the sense that it is geographically non-European?


Challenge from the “East”? If this refers to terrorist activities conducted by radical groups such as Islamic fundamentalists, it is a challenge for Japan as well. Japan has been under constant low-intensity attacks from the DPRK, including abductions, drug-dealing, smuggling and other organized criminal activities, whereas, without historical baggage, Japan enjoys generally amicable relations with the Islamic world; terrorism there is, of course, a matter of concern. The economies of East Asia are critically dependent on the stability of the Islamic world for their energy supplies. Very few in the “West” know that a revered Japanese specialist in

Islam who had translated Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was mysteriously murdered in most peculiar circumstances. I must hasten to add that terrorism and fundamentalism are not limited to the non-Christian "East". Do the resurgent, authoritarian Russia and alleged involvement of Russian authorities in the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London represent less of a challenge to the "West" because Russians are Christian? We can also see all sorts of illiberal intolerance in the "West" coming not only from anti-immigrant racists and ultra-right political movements, but also from some radical elements in the anti-smoking, environmental, animal rights and even human rights movements who care for little other than their own agendas.

Does the challenge refer to the economic rise of China and India? If yes, so what? Is there any reason that the Chinese and Indians must remain poorer than already rich nations? It would be a much more serious problem if the global capitalist economy were to perpetuate the fate of poor countries. True, incorporating vast rising economies represents both opportunities and challenges. Business corporations must compete with them, their impacts on the global environment must be addressed, and a way has to be found to meet growing demands for natural resources. However, this is exactly the same challenge that the business communities, and the economic policies, of both Japan and South Korea are facing.

Does the challenge mean a rapid rise of undemocratic China, which seems to be driven not by a sense of responsibility as a great power but by hawkish nationalism comprising both traditional imperial hubris and a sense of victimization by imperialism from abroad since the 19th century? Indeed! As recent events in Tibet have amply demonstrated, China is still under a highly authoritarian communist regime. The Maoist extremism of the Cultural Revolution is long over, but the regime itself has remained the same. We would be terribly naive if we expected them to show as much respect towards basic values as liberal democracies in both Europe and Asia, characterized by non-violence, civil rights, and above all rules based on the consent of those who are ruled.

Is this really a challenge toward the “West”? This is exactly the core of concerns for democratic Asia (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and India). Take, for instance, the confrontations between protesters and huge numbers of Chinese nationals waving the PRC national flag during the recent Olympic torch relay in Japan, Korea and India, which contrasts with the quiet state-controlled events in the DPRK and Burma. Is it really appropriate to cram all of these countries into the single category of the “East”?

It is unfortunate that European leaders as well as the mass media cannot even remember that there is such a thing as democratic Asia that shares core values as well as serious concerns with the “West”. By talking in terms of the West and the East, Europeans are wasting opportunities to work together for the betterment of our common concerns, such as the global environment and human rights, as well as education, immigration, aging populations and medical systems in our societies. Unless Europeans start taking democratic Asia more seriously rather than regarding it as a funny imitator of modernity for which it claims (often excessively) full credit, we might see a world where Hindu activists’ attacks on Spanish bull-fighting are portrayed as heroic acts protecting their sacred animal, and many Japanese who grew up reading Beatrix Potter’s children’s books will start denigrating such British national pleasures as fox-hunting and rabbit-eating. The coming G8 summit meeting in July can be taken as an opportunity for Europeans to start calling democratic Asians “we” rather than “they”. 

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