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America's Place in the New World

By CHARLES A. KUPCHAN \ April 7, 2012 | *The New York Times*

Washington

IT'S election season again, and the main contenders for the Oval Office are knocking themselves out to reassure Americans that their nation remains at the pinnacle of the global pecking order. Mitt Romney recently declared that "this century must be an American century." Not to be outdone, President Obama insisted in his State of the Union address that "anyone who tells you that America is in decline" doesn't "know what they're talking about."

Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama might overdo it a bit, but they're actually not far off the mark. Despite two draining wars, sluggish growth and a diffusion of power from the West to China and the "rising rest," a combination of economic resilience and military superiority will keep the United States at or near the top for decades.

Still, they're missing the point. The most potent challenge to America's dominance comes not from the continuing redistribution of global power, but from a subtler change: the new forms of governance and capitalism being forged by China and other rising nations.

The democratic, secular and free-market model that has become synonymous with the era of Western primacy is being challenged by state capitalism in China, Russia and the Persian Gulf sheikdoms. Political Islam is rising in step with democracy across the Middle East. And left-wing populism is taking hold from India to Brazil. Rather than following the West's path of development and obediently accepting their place in the liberal international order, rising nations are fashioning their own versions of modernity and pushing back against the West's ideological ambitions.

As this century unfolds, sustaining American power will be the easy part. The hard part will be adjusting to the loss of America's ideological dominance and fashioning consensus and compromise in an increasingly diverse and unwieldy world.

If American leaders remain blind to this new reality and continue to expect conformity to Western values, they will not only misunderstand emerging powers, but also alienate the many countries tired of being herded toward Western standards of governance.

This transition won't be easy. Since the founding era, the American elite and the public have believed in the universality of their model. The end of the cold war only deepened this conviction; after the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratic capitalism seemed the only game in town. But the supposed "end of history" didn't last. Many developing nations have recently acquired the economic and political wherewithal to consolidate brands of modernity that present durable alternatives.

The last 30 years of Chinese development, for example, look nothing like the path followed by Europe and North America. The West's ascent was led by its middle class, which overturned absolute monarchy, insisted on a separation of church and state and unleashed the entrepreneurial and technological potential vital to the Industrial Revolution. In contrast, the authoritarian Chinese state has won over its middle class, and with reason: its economy outperforms those of Western competitors, enriching its bourgeoisie and lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty.

And in today's fast and fluid global economy, the control afforded by state capitalism has its distinct advantages, which is precisely why Russia, Vietnam and others are following China's lead.

The Middle East is similarly set to confound American expectations. Participatory politics may be arriving in the region, but most of the Muslim world recognizes no distinction between the realms of the sacred and the secular; mosque and state are inseparable, ensuring that political Islam is returning as coercive regimes fall. A poll last year revealed that nearly two-thirds of Egyptians want civil law to adhere strictly to the Koran, one of the main reasons Islamists recently prevailed in the country's parliamentary elections.

And Egypt is the rule, not the exception. If nothing else, the Arab Spring has shown that democratization does not equal Westernization, and that it is past time for Washington to rethink its longstanding alignment with the region's secular parties.

True, rising powers like India and Brazil are stable, secular democracies that appear to be hewing closely to the Western model. But these countries have democratized while their populations consist mainly of the urban and rural poor, not the middle class. As a result, both nations have embraced a left-wing populism wary of free markets and of representative institutions that seem to deliver benefits only to a privileged elite.

Rising democracies are also following their own paths on foreign policy, foiling America's effort to turn India into a strategic partner. New Delhi is at odds with Washington on issues ranging from Afghanistan to climate change, and it is deepening commercial ties with Iran just as America is tightening sanctions. Standing up to America still holds cachet in India and Brazil, one reason New Delhi and Brasília line up with Washington less than 25 percent of the time at the United Nations.

Washington has long presumed that the world's democracies will as a matter of course ally themselves with the United States; common values supposedly mean common interests. But if India and Brazil are any indication, even rising powers that are stable democracies will chart their own courses, expediting the arrival of a world that no longer plays by Western rules.

The 21st century will not be the first time the world's major powers embraced quite different models of governance and commerce: during the 17th century, the Holy Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire, Mughal Empire, Qing Dynasty and Tokugawa Shogunate each ran its affairs according to its own distinct rules and culture.

But these powers were largely self-contained; they interacted little and thus had no need to agree on a set of common rules to guide their relations.

This century, in contrast, will be the first time in history in which multiple versions of order and modernity coexist in an interconnected world; no longer will the West anchor globalization. Multiple power centers, and the competing models they represent, will vie on a more level playing field. Effective global governance will require forging common ground amid an equalizing distribution of power and rising ideological diversity.

With that in mind, Washington should acknowledge that America's brand of capitalism and secular democracy must now compete in the marketplace of ideas.

To be sure, even as it adopts a more pluralistic approach, the United States should defend not just its interests, but also its values. It should continue to promote democracy, stand resolute in the defense of human rights and do what it can to stop indiscriminate violence of the sort unleashed by Syria's government.

But American leaders do their country no service when they trumpet a new American century or topple governments in the name of spreading Western values. Doing so will drive away the very nations the United States needs on its side to confront dangerous pariahs and manage a world in which power is broadly shared.

Standing by its own values while also recognizing that there are alternative forms of responsible and responsive governance would ultimately elevate the nation's moral authority, making it more likely that other countries would be as respectful of America's preferences as America should be of theirs.

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