

The West should let China sleep, as Napoleon advised

Western governments ought to let China sleep – by learning to live and work with the Chinese leadership instead of wishing for its transformation or early demise



A teacher and her pupils with Chinese Communist Party emblems at a school in eastern Jiangsu province. The writer says the West is labouring under three flawed assumptions, one of which is that China cannot possibly be a good partner as long as it is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Kishore Mahbubani

Two decades into the 21st century, the main challenge it holds for the West has become clear: the return of China to centre stage.

After managing phase one of China's reform well from 1980 to this year – a period in which China fought no wars – the West is setting itself up for failure in phase two.

It is a failure resulting from three flawed assumptions.

The first – and most embedded in Western minds – is that China cannot possibly be a good partner as long as it is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Communism was supposed to have been swept into the dustbin of history after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. So, the argument goes, how can the world work with an oppressive party that rules against the wisdom of the Chinese people?

Yet there is plenty of evidence to suggest most Chinese people do not perceive the CCP to be oppressive. In fact, the latest Edelman Trust Barometer report suggests that support for the Chinese government is among the highest in the world.

Chinese-American psychology researcher Jean Fan from Stanford University observed, after visiting

the country last year, that “China is changing... fast, in a way that is almost incomprehensible without seeing it in person. In contrast to America's stagnation, China's culture, self-concept and morale are being transformed at a rapid pace – mostly for the better.”

Despite all this, few Western minds can escape from the second flawed assumption: Even if most Chinese people are happy with the Communist party, they and the rest of the world would be better off were they to switch immediately to a democratic system.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent implosion of the living standards of the Russians, some Chinese may have believed in an instant transformation to democracy. Now, many have no doubt that a weak central government will result in massive chaos and suffering for the Chinese people.

For evidence, they look to 4,000 years of Chinese history and, particularly, the so-called “century of humiliation” that China suffered from 1842 to 1949.

Moreover, a democratically elected government is not necessarily a liberal one. The democratically elected Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru seized back the Portuguese colony of Goa in 1961, against the protests of then US President John F.

Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.

A democratic China would probably be even less patient in dealing with Hong Kong and Taiwan. A democratically elected Chinese government would also be loath to be seen as weak in dealing with separatist movements in Xinjiang – look at the Indian government's crackdown in Kashmir.

Indeed, none of China's neighbours, not even the biggest democracies in Asia, are pushing for regime change in Beijing. A stable, predictable China, even as it becomes more assertive, is preferable to the alternative.

The third flawed assumption may be the most dangerous: that a democratic China would inevitably accept Western norms and practices, and happily become a member of the Western-plus club, as Japan has done.

That is not the cultural dynamic that is sweeping through Asia. Both Turkey and India are friends of the West. Yet Turkey has shifted from the secular ideology of its first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, to the Islamic one of its current head, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. And India has moved from the Anglophilic Nehru to the Hindu devotee Narendra Modi.

We must acknowledge that a tsunami of de-Westernisation is

under way. Even more significantly, when Mr Erdogan announces the conversion of the Hagia Sophia to a mosque and Mr Modi resurrects a long-lost Hindu temple on a contested religious site, they are signalling a desire to return to pre-Western cultural roots.

Napoleon was right when he warned Western nations to “let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world”.

Even more than in Turkey and India, there is a potential volcano of anti-Western sentiment waiting to explode in China. Currently, the only political force strong enough to hold down these forces of Chinese nationalism is the CCP.

The successor to the party could well be far less rational. Keep that in mind, instead of proceeding on autopilot with current policies towards China.

The time has come for the West to do a complete reboot and reconsider all its fundamental premises on China. Western governments should learn to live and work with the Chinese leadership, instead of wishing for its transformation or early demise.

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• The writer, a distinguished fellow at the National University of Singapore, is author of *Has The West Lost It?* and *Has China Won?*