

# How strongmen co-opted democracy

**As a new group of global leaders emerges on the international stage, the future of geopolitics is changing hands.**

**Kishore Mahbubani**

The global spread of democracy, a Western gift to the world, was meant to result in the election of liberal, pro-Western leaders.

Instead, a wave of strongman rulers has been elected, many of whom have clear non-Western identities.

This list includes Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and, further back, President Vladimir Putin of Russia.

China's President Xi Jinping can be added to this list, emerging as he did from a fiercely competitive political process within its 80-million-member Communist Party.

The rise of these leaders might

reflect a new chapter in history. For the past 200 years, the West has been unusually powerful, dominating global history even in the post-colonial era. However, mistakes made by the West have given rise to the sharp anti-Western edge of leaders such as Mr Erdogan and Mr Putin. And as American and European power recedes, a global resurrection of non-Western attitudes is taking place. Even pro-Western leaders, such as Mr Abe and Mr Modi, are asserting their non-Western identities.

Europe humiliated Turkey for decades. Under founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, it made the bold decision to leave the Islamic world and join the West. Turkey, a member of Nato, later applied to join the predecessor to the European Union in 1987.

The country was denied, while smaller nations such as Slovakia, Latvia and Estonia were admitted. This rebuff of Turkey undermined the political standing of the secular pro-Western Turks living in and around Istanbul; they were seen as being weak and effete in response to European insults.

The initial election of Mr Erdogan in 2003 represented the Turkish people's strong desire for a leader who could stand up to Europe, and his rule was legitimised by solid economic growth. Even though Mr

Erdogan's popularity has slipped recently – he barely won the April referendum – he has never been more politically powerful. He has the ability to shape Turkey's future by moving it away from its secular past and making its Islamic identity more visible.

Russia suffered even greater humiliation than Turkey did. Then President Mikhail Gorbachev's unilateral dissolution of the Soviet Union was an unimaginable geopolitical gift to the West, especially America.

The Russia that remained was a small shell of its former empire. After winning the Cold War without firing a shot, the West would have been wise to heed Winston Churchill's advice: "In victory, magnanimity."

Instead, it did the exact opposite. Contrary to the implicit assurances given to Mr Gorbachev and Soviet leaders, the West expanded Nato to include former member nations of the Warsaw Pact, embarrassing Russia as its geopolitical territory shrank. This humiliation has led to an inevitable blowback.

After Mr Putin was elected in 2000, the West threatened to expand the Atlantic alliance into Ukraine, even though eminent American statesmen such as Dr Henry Kissinger and Mr Zbigniew Brzezinski cautioned against the

move. Their warnings were ignored, and Mr Putin was left with no choice but to take back Crimea, which had been part of Russia from 1783 to 1954. Even Mr Gorbachev, a pro-Westerner, supported Mr Putin, saying that the Crimean referendum showed that "people really wanted to return to Russia". Given a choice, 95.5 per cent of the voters elected to join Russia.

The Crimean episode shows that there is only so much humiliation any nation can take. Mr Putin's election reflected the will of the Russian people. They wanted a strongman who could stand up to the West. He did this by invading Crimea and supporting President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

There are no saints in geopolitical games; if the West had shown respect for Russia instead of humiliating it, Mr Putin might not have come to power.

Neither Japan nor India has been humiliated by the West in recent times. Indeed, both have drawn geopolitically closer to America since the rise of China. Yet, even in these countries, there is a clear desire to support strong leaders who can forcefully enhance the nation's identity.

Outwardly, Mr Abe appears to be a pro-Western leader, especially with his dapper Western suits. Inwardly, however, he is an ardent

Japanese nationalist. His grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was accused of being a "Class-A war criminal" after World War II. Mr Abe believes he was unjustly accused. Mr Abe has also allowed fellow members of Parliament to visit the controversial nationalist Yasukuni Shrine, drawing the ire of China and South Korea.

Outwardly, Mr Abe maintains deference to America. Inwardly, he is dying to break free from his geopolitical shackles. For example, even as America and Europe were trying hard to isolate Moscow, he worked behind the scenes in Moscow in April 2013 to try to reach a private deal with Mr Putin regarding the disputed Kuril Islands, which Russia had taken over at the end of World War II.

Mr Modi's forceful emergence on the world stage demonstrates that India is no longer a second-tier power. He has shed many of the pro-Western trappings that the Indian establishment was once so proud of.

Despite a punishing schedule during his first official visit to the United States in September 2014, Mr Modi fasted for nine days in observance of the Hindu festival of Navratri. He seldom wears Western clothes and speaks mostly in Hindi. His support of some loud right-wing voices, including the

chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, is worrying.

But Mr Modi is no demagogue. He is a pragmatic nationalist focused on economic growth. In his mind, there is no doubt that we are moving towards a Group of Three world, with India securing an equal place alongside America and China.

Even though Mr Xi functions in a very different political environment from that of Mr Abe and Mr Modi, culturally, there is an affinity between the three leaders: Each is profoundly confident in his respective national identity.

A hundred years ago, Indian, Japanese and Chinese leaders called upon their people to emulate the West to move ahead. Voices like those of statesman Sun Yat-sen in China and social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy in India spoke of the need to mirror the West. Today, such a thought would not even cross the minds of Mr Abe, Mr Modi or Mr Xi. Instead, all three are telling their people to remember their own glorious histories.

As more and more countries shed their deference to the West, the continuing resurrection of strong nationalist leaders is inevitable. Our geopolitical future is likely to lie with this new wave. NYTIMES

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