

The 'Asian Values' debate, 30 years on

The pandemic has revived questions about how societies should best organise themselves. It's over-simplifying matters to draw conclusions based on political systems alone.



Bilahari Kausikan

The "Asian Values" debate of the early 1990s engaged such towering figures as Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, Kim Dae-jung of South Korea, and Ishihara Shintaro of Japan. Today, it is only a minor academic concern.

As a very minor participant in that debate, I can testify that, at least for Singapore, the debate was only secondarily about values and primarily about politics and geopolitics. Values were instruments for these ends. I do not suggest that every country or individual that participated in that debate had exactly the same motivations. Obviously they did not. But what linked them all was that, at bottom, their motivations, whether they were conscious of it or not, were political.

This is inherent in the nature of human rights and of values in general. More than 60 years ago, political scientist David Easton defined politics as "the authoritative allocation of values". I have not found a better definition, and it is one that applies equally appropriately to international as well as domestic politics. It certainly applies to the politics and geopolitics of human rights.

A moment's reflection must, I think, lead any reasonable person to the conclusion that the historical process by which the revolutionary idea that human beings have rights by virtue of their humanity and that our common humanity gives us an interest in the rights of others, grew, gathered force and entered into the intellectual mainstream, was inescapably political.

How could it be otherwise? Ideas never prevail merely on the basis of their inherent merit. They have to be fought for. The fights, whether by states, NGOs or individuals, are conditioned by their political and historical contexts and cannot be fully understood devoid of their contexts. Even the noblest of ideals are never just noble ideals but also weapons or instruments deployed for specific purposes.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights grew out of the horrors of the Second World War



People at a Covid-19 test site in Beijing in January. The successes of diverse Asian systems in tackling the pandemic perhaps point to the influence of culture rather than political organisation per se, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

and the Holocaust, and the determination that they never be repeated. That the ideals of the Universal Declaration have always been honoured more by their breach than their observance does not detract from the fact that its adoption in 1948 represents, at least in theory, a modification of Westphalian principles and practices.

In practice, how substantial a modification is the result of specific negotiations over particular cases and differs from case to case. These negotiations are inescapably political, and the animating value of any political process is power. It is a fool's errand to look for, or try to impose any consistency on, the outcomes of specific negotiations except in the trite sense that power will almost always prevail. That is why, for example, the International Criminal Court has only prosecuted individuals from weak countries. Double standards are inherent in all human rights diplomacy.

WESTERN HUBRIS

The Asian Values debate arose out of the circumstances of the end of the Cold War. Specifically, it grew out of the hubris that infected

American and, more generally, Western foreign policies during the early 1990s. That hubris in turn stemmed from the tendency to view the end of the Cold War not just as another – albeit momentous – geopolitical event in a geopolitical dynamic that would continue as long as international relations are primarily shaped by a system of sovereign states, but as the very denouement of History itself.

Today, the absurdity of the idea is self-evident. But it was not self-evident at the time to the US and its allies in Europe who claimed universality for their particular definitions of human rights and values. Something of that attitude lingers on even today. But all that has happened in the last 30 years has taken much of the conviction out of the claim. Today, the West defends the idea of universality in a largely pro forma manner; more as one of the means by which particular interests are defended – say, abolition of capital punishment – rather than a matter of ideology or basic principle. This is a triumph for common sense.

If rights or values are indeed universal, they are universal only at such a high level of generality that they prescribe nothing that is practically useful about how

societies should organise themselves because the organisation of particular societies can never be separated from their specific historical, cultural and economic circumstances.

It has always seemed self-evident to me that history and culture assert a profound influence on social, political and economic development. How societies organise themselves will of course evolve as circumstances change. But evolution is not to be understood in any teleological manner as a one-way journey forever up and up and on and on towards the Light. But these, what I consider commonplace observations, were fiercely contested at the time.

THE CLINTON CONTEXT

The beginning of the 1990s was a period of great potential geopolitical complication. China was beginning to take off. Freed of the constraints of their de facto anti-Soviet alliance, the US and China were beginning to eye each other warily, particularly after the Tiananmen incident. President Bill Clinton was elected in 1993 after accusing his predecessor of "coddling dictators". When Mr Clinton was elected, the Democrats

had been out of power for about two decades, except for the short and exceptionally disastrous Carter presidency that even Democrats were eager to forget.

The concern was that an inexperienced administration seemed somewhat more than merely inclined to give human rights and democracy promotion a more prominent role in US relations with China; more than we thought these matters warranted because these were issues on which the Chinese Communist Party would never yield. The potential for trouble seemed great. If trouble broke out in US-China relations, it would have roiled and unsettled our entire region.

Singapore had just expelled an American diplomat for interfering in our domestic politics. His intentions were good. Inspired by the passions and delusions of those times, he wanted to hasten the heathen – that's us – along what he considered the path of righteousness. But we all know where good intentions proverbially lead us.

This then was the context of the Asian Values debate from Singapore's perspective. Our goals were defensive and modest: to encourage our friends in America and Europe to take a less simplistic view of political development in our region and buy some time for the passions of a new administration to cool and allow common sense and the sobering imperatives of realpolitik to reassert themselves, as they eventually did. And once they did, we set aside the debate as having served its purpose. But it was only a postponement, not a resolution.

NOT A NEW COLD WAR

We are today once again in a period of great geopolitical complication in which US-China strategic competition is a new structural condition of international relations. During the 30 or so years since the Asian Values debate, the world economy has transformed. This has shaped the context in which strategic competition between the US and China will now play out. This new context is the primary reason why, despite the re-emphasis on the ideological element in US-China relations, describing their competition as a "New Cold War" is an inappropriate and intellectually lazy trope. US-China competition is fundamentally different from earlier US-Soviet competition.

The competition between the US and the Soviet Union was between two separate systems connected only tangentially. The US and China compete for dominance over a single global system in which they are enmeshed in supply chains of a scope, density and complexity that makes complete, across-the-board, "decoupling" highly improbable.

Whatever concerns we may have about China or the US or both, we cannot detach ourselves from either, not as long as we are part of the world economy and who isn't? This has blurred the political and moral clarity of Cold War choices. It would be prudent to de-emphasise the ideological element of US-China competition because it can only further

complicate an already complex relationship.

CHINESE HUBRIS

Unfortunately, the pandemic, and the contrast between the effective Chinese response and American and European bungling, have again brought questions about how societies should best organise themselves to the fore and threatens to revive the Asian Values debate. This time the hubris seems more on the Chinese side.

It was a strategic mistake for China to have prematurely abandoned Deng Xiaoping's sage policy of hiding capabilities and biding time towards the end of Hu Jintao's administration. President Xi Jinping has doubled down on the error.

A strategic mistake is very difficult to correct. Once exposed and flaunted, ambitions will not be easily forgotten and inevitably provoke counter-reactions, as we are already witnessing. But some in China still seem inclined to invest the differing responses to the pandemic with sweeping quasi-philosophical significances as the West did with the end of the Cold War.

The root cause of China's mistake was to regard the angst that Western societies subjected themselves to after the global financial crisis of 2008, as a permanent condition. Western societies periodically go through such bouts of self-doubt and self-flagellation. In the 1930s, from the late 1960s through to the end of the 1970s, the West went through similar periods of loss of self-confidence. But while often slow to react to crises, Western democracies are resilient and have always recovered their elan.

China had its own domestic reasons for touting the superiority of its system. But the rest of us should not draw hasty and simplistic conclusions about the effectiveness of different political systems from their responses to the pandemic. We have no dog in this fight and should assess the situation clinically.

The Chinese Leninist system and the various types of Western democracies each have their own strengths and their own dysfunctions. Taiwan, whose political system is similar to Western systems, also did very well in containing the pandemic. Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore, whose systems are different from the Chinese system but are also different from one another and Taiwan, have also been effective.

The successes of diverse Asian systems perhaps point to the influence of culture rather than political organisation per se. Still, don't forget that Australia and New Zealand, both undoubtedly organised on the basis of Western democratic values, handled the pandemic well too.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Bilahari Kausikan, a former diplomat, is chairman of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. This article is based on his remarks at last Friday's Centre for Asia Leadership Roundtable on Asianism Retold: Asian Values & Leadership.