

It has become a constant of recent punditry that the Decline of the West is in full, and irreversible, swing. The evidence in support of this view is not that easy to refute. The President of the United States talks, openly, of his distaste for the international institutions established, under American leadership, after 1945.

The United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, NATO and the European Union are only a small proportion of those who have incurred his wrath and who have been weakened by his attacks. Furthermore, he has lavished praise on dictators such as Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un while refusing to criticise Vladimir Putin. At the same time, he has insulted Angela Merkel and Justin Trudeau and appears to have gone off Emmanuel Macron and Theresa May.

All this may be dismissed as the idiosyncrasies of one man, but the truth is that Trump's disillusion with the status quo is only one powerful symbol of a tectonic shift that has been happening in recent years and is gathering pace.

Even without Trump, the European Union would be in deep trouble with the departure of the United Kingdom, the immigration crisis that may bring down Merkel, and the appearance of hard-right governments in Italy, Poland and Hungary. Even before Trump, NATO was far weaker than it should be because of the refusal of most of its member states to increase their defence expenditure to the 2% of GDP to which they are committed. Likewise, while globalisation and free trade have, undoubtedly, created great prosperity and economic growth they have, already, alienated hundreds of millions of people who have become the losers not the gainers in this economic transformation.

However, the first two decades of the 21st century have also experienced a geopolitical revolution that has nothing to do with the incumbent of the White House. During the Cold War, there were two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Since 1989 there has only been one, the United States, which has been so powerful compared to all other countries that it has been described as a Super-Duper Power.

Now China's extraordinary growth means that we will be back to two superpowers for the foreseeable future. Indeed, China is likely to be the number one economic power in the world while, the United States will retain military and diplomatic supremacy for many years to come. In relative terms, the big loser is Europe and Western culture which has dominated the world since the 18th century. Europe, especially, Britain, France and Spain, had massive empires which, collectively, controlled the world with only a handful of states in every continent that were never colonised nor became dependencies.

That is now history. Asia, and China, in particular, are becoming the economic centres of the world not just because of the size of their populations and economic growth, but because of their proven ability to deliver capitalist prosperity considerably better than in those countries where capitalism was first invented. Not just China, but Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, India and Malaysia are transforming their own economies and challenging the rest of us.

However, as noted, the decline of Europe and Western culture is relative, not absolute. Western Europe, North America, Australia and many other countries remain healthy nations with unprecedented prosperity, high employment, truly democratic governments and genuine respect for, and belief in, the rule of law. Authoritarian leaders like Putin and Xi Jinping may have been making many of the headlines. Populism, xenophobia and nationalism may be more threatening than before. However, true democracy and the rule of law remains far

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stronger than they were for virtually the whole of the 20th century and the rest of human history.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, all countries in Eastern Europe, including the Baltic States, have had governments elected by their own people and have embraced the rule of law and independent courts. There are strains today, particularly in Poland and Hungary, but they remain part of the Free World. Russia may be aggressive, especially in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. But until 1989, Russia controlled half of Europe right to the heart of Germany. Now its borders begin over a thousand miles to the east, further away from the rest of Europe than at any time since Peter the Great in the 17th century.

At the same time, Latin America which used to be controlled by military juntas throughout Central and South America now have genuine democracies in every country except Cuba and Venezuela. In Asia too, the last thirty years have seen South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia rejecting dictatorships and embracing democracies. The recent elections in Malaysia demonstrated the strength of their democratic system. Not discounting the increasing authoritarianism of Erdogan in Turkey or Orban in Hungary. However, their victories were not the result of phony, rigged elections. On all the evidence they remain attractive leaders to a considerable majority of their people.

We used to assume that the end of communism would lead to "liberal democracy" being embraced by the world. Recent events require us to modify that assumption. While democracy remains the preferred system of government, liberalism is under greater challenge than before. Liberalism assumes greater tolerance for minorities, an embrace of pluralism in our society, "progressive" policies on sexual issues and a welcome for greater globalisation. These qualities, both in Europe and throughout the Western world are under greater pressure than we anticipated.

Perhaps the pace of social change has been too fast for some to accept. Maybe we have forgotten that rapid reform creates many losers as well as winners. Paradoxically, democracy and free elections can sometimes transfer power to a less tolerant majority, who would have been without that power in an authoritarian state. The tyranny of the majority can be as much of a challenge as other systems of government.

The future may not be what it used to be. However, it remains, for the vast majority, considerably better than for our parents and grandparents throughout the world.



***Rt Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind KCMG QC*** is a former United Kingdom Foreign Secretary and former Chairman of its Intelligence and Security Committee.