



William Pfaff

U.S. decline will leave a void

Below is an excerpt from a speech by William Pfaff, a contributing columnist for the International Herald Tribune, to the 9th Asia-Europe Press Forum. Excerpts from a speech by Kavi Chongkittavorn, assistant group editor of The Nation, will appear tomorrow. - Ed.

The United States has, since the end of World War II, been by far the greatest external influence on both Asia and Western Europe. Its cultural influence has been very wide but superficial; its economic influence has been far more important. Its most important influence has been geopolitical, in imposing a structure on international relations that persists to the present day. If that structure changes, then the situation and possibilities of the Europeans and of Asian governments and societies change in basic ways.

My argument is that this structure will change.

The more modest version [of the "end of history" thesis] said simply that the United States had the role of leader because it was the most advanced society. This view conveniently coincided with an old American sense of special destiny that went back to the Calvinist intellectual and religious convictions of the New England settlers of the 17th century.

But after Sept. 11, 2001, Americans were under attack by enemies who not only were malevolent, but asserted their own claim to moral superiority. The America that emerged greatly resembles the isolationist and xenophobic America of the past. It is new that many of its political intellectuals and political leaders are anti-European and also preoccupied by the threat of the European Union as a political rival.

The neo-conservative movement offered Washington a utopian ideology that articulated the aggrieved

nationalism and assertion of American military and political power provoked by the shock of a "homeland" attack. A good many Democrats concur.

From an Asian perspective, one recognizes more distant origins for the modern American role, starting with the American demand that Japan "open" itself, provoking the Meiji Restoration. But Europe's relationship to Asia is much older than the American one, Europe and much of Asia being fundamentally important to one another in a myriad of ways from the time of the first tentative expeditions of Portuguese and Dutch traders into Asian waters. But with France's withdrawal from Indochina in 1955, Europe's role in Asia seemed exhausted.

Maoism in China had an important influence elsewhere in Asia, and even in a radically distorted way in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, but China did not itself act upon the international scene in any major way. The same must be said of India, Pakistan, and Indonesia, all of them civilizations and societies experiencing radical internal change during the postwar period. South Korea has — until recent months — remained frozen in the international relationships that prevailed at the time of the armistice in 1953.

Today, China occupies an ambiguous position in American perceptions. Some consider it a strategic military threat; in American business circles and among political moderates and liberals, it usually is seen as both commercial partner and commercial rival but no longer as a strategic threat.

The general assumption is that Asia in general will in the future be the most important region of the world in terms of American commercial interests, and a security concern chiefly for that reason.

The announcement this summer

of major U.S. military redeployments, with troop withdrawals from Asia (as from Europe), raised new and unanswered questions about the U.S. security relationship with Japan.

A military emphasis is visible in Democratic party circles also. North Asia is seen as a zone of long-term danger if the United States does not keep its dominant military position.

The global security structure formed in the post-World War II period has already been undermined by the excesses of the Bush administration, but it also suffers the dilapidations of age and the effects of irrelevance.

I would propose that one of the defining events of the decade to come will be Asia's "return to history." In Asia as a whole, this return has already begun. It resulted from the reaction of religious, social and political forces inside the Islamic Middle East against the intrusive policies of the United States and Israel.

Elsewhere in Asia, South Korean, Indian and Chinese economic growth is already changing the political and economic structure of the region, with a revival of certain traditional rivalries.

America's military strength, seemingly very great and yet almost entirely irrelevant to the real issues of the war on terrorism, continues to camouflage American fiscal and industrial weaknesses. All of this seriously affects the long-term position of the United States in Asia, as in Europe.

The American claim to legitimate international leadership has been weakened greatly, leaving an absence of power. This is a dangerous situation that will eventually make great demands on all parties. There will inevitably be an Asian and European re-engagement with history, for which both remain largely unprepared.

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