

NOVEMBER 22-24, 2013

THE WEST TODAY: CALCULATED POWER OR COMPLETE PARALYSIS?

— Robin Shepherd

Do we know what we want? Can we get it even if we do? Quite a lot of what counts for modern-day Western angst is captured by the fact that such questions need to be asked at all.

It was not always thus. A mere two decades ago, a Western world emboldened by victory in the Cold War was sure of what it wanted – global democracy and prosperity – and confident it had the might to achieve it.

Nowadays, in a West still shaken by economic crisis and the partial discrediting of the political and economic elites that have governed us, we do not even seem clear about what we stand for, let alone how we should project ourselves across the world.

And there is little point in endlessly agonising over means if the end to which those means might be deployed is elusive.

When the British parliament voted down Prime Minister Cameron's request for the approval of the possible use of military force in response to Bashar al-Assad's chemical attack in Syria, members of parliament did not, in the main, argue that the West couldn't do something, they argued that it shouldn't: Not our business; leave Britain alone.

President Obama's decision to refer the same matter to Congress arose out of a similar lack of certainty about purpose and value. He said he knew what he wanted, but he left it to others to make his decision for him.

The United States did indeed have the power to act. But should it and why? What does it really have to do with us? Many politically-minded Americans thought like that at the time.

Seeping into this discussion from all sides are the zeitgeist-forming issues of the post-Cold War era. For when you boil it all down, the world that we wanted in the aftermath of the fall of communism has not turned out as expected. True, central and eastern Europe has largely succeeded in going "Western." Russia went forward for a while, too, before going backward, helping take Ukraine with it. Authoritarian Belarus had already been a lost cause before the name Vladimir Putin had crept up on the radar. Former Soviet central-Asia likewise.

China never made the move. The Middle East enjoyed a widely celebrated romantic foray, but few can even use the words "Arab" and "Spring" in the same sentence these days without a profound sense of regret at hopes and promises unfulfilled.

And then there is 9/11 and the wars that followed it. Despite enormous expense in terms of blood and treasure, neither Iraq nor Afghanistan have become stable, functional, democratic societies. One does not need to commission an opinion poll to appreciate how influential on public (and elite) perceptions Iraq and Afghanistan have been.

There is nothing so paralysing as a fear borne of fatalism. When, as the now deeply embedded perception has it, we have already seen so many of our hopes dashed, what is the point in forlornly expending our efforts once again? In societies already drenched in the visionless pursuit of immediate gratification, where does "sacrifice" and "value" get a hearing? Retreat. Stay away. Enjoy what we have. Live for the moment. Tomorrow is another day. These are the mantras of our time.

Against that gigantic edifice of societal thinking, supporters of Western values do in fact run up against the problem of our diminishing relative strength. A vicious circle is thus formed: We are unsure of what we want, but if we lack the means, what's the point in re-thinking the ends, and if we don't know what the ends are, why bother thinking too hard about the means?

If all this is indeed the basis of our modern day Western angst, there is little sign that it is contagious. As we step aside, a space is opened up for others to step into.

Russia has plainly got that message, as we have seen most obviously over Syria. China may, for now, still be on its self-declared trajectory as a country enjoying a peaceful rise. But how long can that last?

A question can certainly be raised as to whether our predicament is characterised by calculated power or merely by paralysis. But, ultimately, that may be a false dichotomy because paralysis occurs when power is cut off.

And when our power, as at all our greatest moments, is generated primarily by a confidence in our values, then the failure to no longer believe in those values is capable of shutting us down.

And if that is allowed to happen an entirely different global system, infused with entirely different values, will surely take its place.

Robin Shepherd is Director, International Affairs at the Henry Jackson Society, the London based think tank.

