

A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ACTA) on 17
December, 2004

Thank you for sharing with us the wisdom of the Dalai Lama. I am sure if more people embrace these precepts, the world would be a much better place.

But the world is still full of turmoil. Are we witnessing the world's eventual happy convergence on liberal democracy at Fukuyama's End of History or are we heading towards Huntington's Clash of Civilizations? Or is the truth somewhere in between? What is fairly obvious, however, is that there are more and more varied asymmetric risks in the global order.

Well aware of the eminent company I am in, for what it is worth, I still can't resist the temptation of 'proffering brick in the hope of being reciprocated with jade' on the whole new geopolitics of asymmetric risks.

Following a clear public mandate, Bush's replacement of Powell signals more of the same neo-conservative, self-righteous unilateral chauvinism. In face of US's unparalleled military and economic superiority, what better arsenal do its smaller adversaries have than asymmetric tactics so beloved of Sun Zi's Art of War?

So unless the geopolitical and economic causes of Terrorism are effectively addressed, I am afraid that the chapters on Al-Quaeda, Iraq and Afghanistan, would not be closed any time soon. Nor for that matter would true democracy be easily implanted anywhere regardless of the social, educational, economic and cultural soil and climate. It takes a critical mass of conditions to grow a particular type of wine.

As for Iran, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East, their political fragility is only belied by their mighty oil resources, for which the whole industrialised and industrialising world remains hungry. It is a trump card tempting too many hands, overtly or covertly. Education and a vigorous widening of opportunities for the masses appear to be a priority remedy. There is some indication that Saudi Arabia is moving in that direction. I hope that more of such measures in the Middle East are afoot, and fast.

Linked to all this is of course the Palestinian issue. Arafat is gone but none is confident that his style of confrontation will also die a natural death. Much demands to be done to provide the Palestinian people with long term security and hope for a better future.

Nuclear non-proliferation is an important aim in the fight on terror and for world peace. So we need to watch this space in the case of Iran and North Korea. But unlike some larger countries, these states do not necessarily seek global ascendancy. Perhaps what they really need can be provided through multilateral non-nuclear means. And holding a bible in one hand and a sword in the other is not the best way to conversion.

Another recent threat to global order is the situation in the Taiwan Straits. But the recent surprising election result of the Taiwan Legislature shows that voters are not always a pipe for the politician's fingers. They sometimes think better of calculated risk.

As for China, there is always a tendency for hype or cynicism. But usually there is more perspective in judging relative to its recent past than to some external Western pre-conceived idea or model. What is evident is that never in China's history have so many been lifted out of subsistence poverty in so short a time. Daunting challenges still remain, but there is a definite sense of economic dynamism and outreach, political consensus amongst the leadership, and readiness for international cooperation rather than confrontation. Properly engaged, China is likely to continue to contribute to stability in the global order, which also happens to be in her own best interest.

As regards Putin, I'd like to share an imagined mathematical perspective I came across during one of my past visits to Moscow. For reason of KGB instinct or power consolidation, he ensures that he alone is the Integer, the Number 1, with all his colleagues or peers within or outside the Kremlin reduced to a status no more than within the hierarchy of decimals. The more anyone or any group moves up and threatens to become an Integer, the greater the risk of repressive action, as Khodorkovskiy has found to his cost.

In the short to medium term, this may reinforce Russia's internal stability as Putin's supremacy remains unchallenged. But this causes problems where it involves external interface in terms of international trade or investment. And it puts the West on guard with Putin's efforts in building a better international rapport, including its attempt to join the WTO. Nevertheless, a better response is to engage Russia, and not to ostracize it, especially in a forum where international rules are obligatory, such as WTO. Constructive engagement becomes even more important in view of the possible adverse geopolitical and economic permutations implied by Russia's sizeable oil and gas resources.

As we live in an increasingly interconnected and multi-dimensional world, there are doubtless new risks but also new paradigms and opportunities. Let us move forward into the New Year with a new horizon, a new hope, and new wisdom.