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OPINION



A clash of identities

Li Xing says the global democratic alliance is nothing more than a Western political fantasy

US President Joe Biden has framed the Ukraine war as a battle between “democracy and autocracy”, while also claiming “the West is now stronger, more united than it has ever been”.

During a recent visit to Taiwan, former Danish leader and Nato secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that, when combined, the world’s democracies represent 60 per cent of the global economy, providing an overwhelming deterrence to Beijing’s ambitions regarding Taiwan.

The irony is that, if we applied this logic to the Ukraine war, the US and Europe would have already won. In reality, the question is why there is no global democratic alliance on the war, with two of the world’s largest democracies, India and Indonesia, preferring not to take sides.

Contrary to Biden and Rasmussen’s postulations, the Ukraine war is widening the global disparity between attitudes to the United States, China and Russia. Cambridge University recently released a report that merges data from 30 global surveys spanning 137 countries.

It found that, “Among the 1.2 billion people who inhabit the world’s liberal democracies, three-quarters (75 per cent) now hold a negative view of China, and 87 per cent a negative view of Russia. However, for the 6.3 billion people who live in the rest of the world, the picture is reversed. In these societies, 70 per cent feel positively towards China, and 66 per cent positively towards Russia.”

Why is the world so divided over such a simple issue of political correctness in Russia’s invasion of a sovereign state? The

answer lies in the contradiction between the West’s two inherent identities which tends to generate double standards when dealing with global affairs.

These two identities are “market capitalism” and “political liberalism”. The former refers to the capitalist mode of production, characterised by private ownership, capital accumulation, profit pursuit, surplus value and the like.

“High living standards’ and ‘material well-being’ are seen not merely as Western values but universal ones

The latter is a system of norms and values based on individual civil rights, democracy, secularism, rule of law, and political, economic and religious freedom. Proponents of liberalism argue the world would be peaceful if every country became a democracy, because “democratic states rarely, if ever, go to war with one another”.

Western ideologists believe there is a positive interconnection between these two systems: the success of the former will lead to the latter, while the achievement of the latter will further facilitate the former.

The West’s victory in the Cold War is heralded as a mark of the global triumph of these two systems. Regarding the first, the victory indicates that Western market capitalism is ubiquitous and powerful.

Economic growth in the form of wealth-seeking and self-enrichment is regarded as a common desire among all people. “High living standards” and “material well-being” are seen not merely as Western values but universal ones.

Since the end of the Cold War, West-driven globalisation has made market capitalism a truly global system, with every individual and state operating according to its dominant mode of functioning. Globalisation has resulted in a complex world structure characterised by interconnection and interdependence.

It has also led to the fragmentation and decentralisation of production chains, as well as the worldwide dispersion and integration of the different segments of these chains. The rise of China’s pivotal position in global manufacturing supply chains, and Russia’s position in the global energy supply chain, are the outcomes of globalisation and global capitalism.

Regarding the second system, the outcome of the Cold War proves Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis, marking “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. Liberalism has gone beyond the form of an ideology to become a tool used by the West to maintain and reinforce its status as the global hegemon.

Now, the underlying assumptions of the West’s dual identities are being challenged both by the rise of China and by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Today, there is widespread anxiety in the West that an illiberal China is becoming one of the world’s dominant powers. The West suffers from

“China syndrome”, a set of psychological symptoms characterised by fear, hysteria and demoralisation.

This is because China’s economic success and its global rise do not conform to the interaction between the two identities. China is able not only to challenge them, but to offer alternatives with “Chinese characteristics”, making it a “systemic rival”.

When viewing the coverage of the Ukraine war, it becomes clear that major Western media outlets acknowledge the fact that the world is divided over the war, and so is Europe. Some EU countries have only implemented selective sanctions against Russia, while others have resisted joining the sanctions, especially those that are dependent on Russia’s energy supply.

Yes, sanctions hurt Russia, but they also contribute to disruptions in global supply chains, higher global commodity prices and a slowdown in global growth. As market capitalism’s law of value becomes the survival mechanism of every society, few countries would risk the loss of the Chinese market and the negative impact of sanctioning Russia for the sake of “defending democracy against autocracy”.

Having lived in the West for decades, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing wrong with Western identities as such. The problem lies in the contradiction between them, so that whenever a choice has to be made between them, the law of value always takes priority, while liberal values are optional.

Many double-standard policies of the West are a result of this contradiction, which is why the world is divided today.

Professor Li Xing is director of the Research Centre on Development and International Relations, Department of Politics and Society, at Aalborg University, Denmark

Bad practices on waste continue amid new policies

Edwin Lau Che-feng says despite a change in leadership and putting new initiatives in place, the city’s efforts to reduce the amount of rubbish dumped daily appear to be failing

Many people, including me, hoped that some of the undesirable practices of the former administration would improve under the leadership of Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu. Six months in, clearly this has not happened.

For instance, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has published annual figures on municipal solid waste since 1991. However, publication is getting even slower than before: the 2021 report was not published until December 2022. Such a huge delay in making vital information available to legislators and the Advisory Council on the Environment – the official environmental watchdog – makes it virtually impossible for them to give timely advice.

The department, supported by many professionals, should be well aware of changes regarding disposal trends for various types of solid waste based on the pandemic-affected social and economic scenarios. Even ordinary people can see the huge increase in disposal of single-use meal boxes and plastic bags as ordering a takeaway became the “new normal” to avoid Covid-19.

The 2021 report did not reveal much improvement in the city’s waste management. On the contrary, it confirms that the Blueprint for Sustainable Use of Resources 2013-2022, launched 10 years ago, has failed to achieve several key targets including the daily per capita municipal solid waste disposal rate. The target set for 2022 is 0.8kg, but the latest rate has climbed to 1.53kg, meaning Hongkongers are disposing of waste at almost double the target rate.

The three types of waste that are closely associated with our daily activities – food waste, plastic bottles and plastic bags – each recorded increases in 2021 compared with 2020. This was the case even as the government-funded community green stations and stores collected more recyclables in the same period.

The Legislative Council and the Ombudsman need to look seriously into the matter. Much time, effort and resources have been devoted over the past 10 years to slashing waste disposal to meet the blueprint target. Yet, the outcome scores a fail.

Even ordinary people can see the huge increase in disposal of single-use meal boxes and plastic bags

The EPD has recently made several changes on waste management. First, the plastic shopping bag levy rose from 50 cents per bag to HK\$1, together with the removal of some of the unnecessary exemptions from the last day of 2022. Second, the EPD began removing the three-colour recycling bins placed in urban areas last year without providing any other facilities to keep the public practising recycling.

The plastic bag levy increase is a delayed action. The initial phase of the bag levy was launched in July 2009, and quickly showed a significant decrease in bag distribution by the mandated retailers. However, it was not long before there was a rebound in bag usage, which the authorities allowed to go on for more than 10 years before reviewing the effectiveness of the policy.

I visited Hong Kong’s two largest supermarket chains in January to see how they and their customers were behaving. I was glad to see one woman take several apples to the counter and tell the cashier, “I have my own bag”. In fact, she could have got a bag for free for the unwrapped apples but chose to demonstrate environmentally responsible behaviour.

At another supermarket in the same district, I witnessed a man surreptitiously unwrapping pre-wrapped pears. Perhaps he knew he could not get a free plastic bag when buying pre-wrapped fruit. My colleagues have also witnessed similar incidents at other supermarkets.

The two stores I visited had removed the small, clear plastic bags that were placed near fruit and vegetables in the past for use by customers for free. They have put up notices regarding the new plastic bag levy, but they are rather small and might not catch the attention of shoppers.

Supermarkets and other retailers should enhance their in-store monitoring to prevent customers from engaging in tricks to evade paying the bag levy. The authorities should also take this moment to enhance promotion of the aims of the bag levy through radio and television programmes and social media platforms.

Retailers should not treat the income generated from the bag levy as additional profit but instead channel that income to worthy causes by donating it to charities providing social or environmental services. Let’s hope this will become another “new normal”.

Edwin Lau Che-feng is executive director of The Green Earth



The authorities should enhance promotion of the aims of the bag levy through social media. Photo: Jelly Tse

India may be America’s best partner in multipolar world

Akhil Ramesh says the US, for once, should team up with a nation not reliant on its military aid

At the risk of sounding polemical, if Indian analysts at think tanks in Washington, New York or London got a penny every time they heard an armchair expert opine about how India is a very difficult country or why it is not condemning so and so, they’d all be rich by now.

Last year, New Delhi’s position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine meant that those opinions became a prominent feature of any commentary on US-India relations. The US-India partnership has expanded far and wide, from Hawaii to the Himalayas, from defence and maritime security to vaccines, climate change and, most recently, supply chains.

Yet, Washington’s Cold-War-era ideas of India, and the Biden administration’s bifurcation of the world into “us vs them”, has proved a dampener on the relations. India was the leading force behind the non-alignment movement during the Cold War. A 21st-century transformation of that policy is the Modi administration’s multi-alignment strategy, which aims to forge issue-based partnerships and alliances over the ideological groupings the West champions.

But this frustrates the government and think tank analysts alike in Washington – they dislike India’s strategic autonomy.

For India, its collaboration with Russia is a time-tested defence and trade partnership and, more recently, one of economic value. In mid-2022, Moscow offered New Delhi a steep discount on crude oil and was providing a steady

supply of fertilisers. Understandably, India did not shoot down that offer.

New Delhi takes into account these issues that affect the bottom of the proverbial pyramid while crafting its multi-alignment foreign policy strategy. This explains India’s abstentions in the UN resolutions condemning Russia. Still, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made headlines by publicly telling Russian President Vladimir Putin that it “is not an era of war”.

Modi’s calls for peace, like Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s, weren’t ideologically motivated but in the interests of the global economy and his electorate.

This year, as India assumes the G20 chair, Washington will become aware of India’s feet in both worlds – the Global South and the West – and its agnostic approach to ideological groupings.

Modi, through op-eds in newspapers – from the South China Morning Post and The Washington Post to the Kommersant – has outlined his administration’s vision as the chair of the Group of 20. In the Kommersant, he wrote that “the priorities of our G20 presidency will be shaped in consultation not only with our G20 partners, but also with our fellow travellers from the Global South, whose voices usually go unheard”.

In evoking slogans such as “one Earth, one family, one future”, and characterising the “confrontation and competition between ideas, ideologies and personalities” as “a zero-sum mindset”, Modi has dismissed the West’s

courting of India to enter its ideological fold. India seeks to champion the causes of the Global South while forging its path in the fourth industrial revolution through partnerships with Western economies.

Countries in the Global South are aware of India’s strategic multi-alignment and, as a result, seek its leadership in global causes from vaccines to conflict prevention. From Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to, most recently, Ukraine’s President Vladimir Zelensky, world leaders have reached out to Modi for a peaceful settlement on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

India’s feet in the Global South and its ambitions of modernising using Western technologies are not necessarily at odds

But should India step up to this role, it will not be from the partisan place the West expects it to be – siding with Ukraine while severing ties with Russia.

New Delhi has actively worked towards de-hyphenating the Russo-India bilateral relationship with the US-India relationship. Interestingly, that has not been the case for US-India-China. New Delhi’s deteriorating relations with Beijing

has proved to be a catalyst for its increased cooperation with Washington.

With Indian and Chinese troops clashing once again last month, shared concerns or an antagonism towards China could become the impetus for US-India cooperation to grow.

India’s feet in the Global South and its ambitions of modernising using Western technologies are not necessarily at odds. The US, for once, should partner with a nation not reliant on its military aid.

While this independence may irk some in Washington, American taxpayers can rest assured their tax dollars are not underwriting the security of a faraway land nor will they be deployed to fight a war in the region.

Unlike America’s allies in the Middle East, Europe and East Asia who underspend on defence and count on America to save the day, India, with the world’s second-largest ground forces, as the fifth-largest economy with over 150 nuclear warheads, and having fought three wars since its independence, is well equipped to deal with its own challenges.

This year, as the chair of the G20 and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the host of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity meetings, India’s multi-alignment strategy will be in action and its multipolar ambitions will come to fruition. The US should capitalise on India’s rising role both on the world stage and in the Global South. India may be America’s best bet for a partner, not just in the Indo-Pacific region but in the Global South.

Akhil Ramesh is a fellow at the Pacific Forum