Envisioning a New World Order and its Implications in the Digital Age

By Mahathir Mohamad

With the growing strength of Asia’s economies, there is widespread debate about the emergence of a new world order to replace the post-World War II system. Some argue that the Digital Age will help shape that new order.

But former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad argues that without a fundamental change in values and culture, there are plenty of reasons not to be optimistic about the possible outcome.
IN ATTEMPTING TO ENVISION a new world order and its implications in the Digital Age, it is important, in my view, to recognize that this exercise is not about wishful thinking or planning for what the future should look like.

Envisioning is about trying to foretell what the future is likely to be, about predicting the future based on what we know from our observations of the past and the present. It is about discerning current trends and where they are likely to lead us. No crystal ball will be needed for this, but long experience may help.

For centuries we have been living in a Eurocentric world. Our thoughts and our ideas, our values, systems and ideologies, our overall behavior are largely due to European influences if not European origins. The way we conduct our lives and the way we dress are basically European. The way we manage our economies and our governments is European, including, of course, the belief that democracy is the only form of government that everyone must have.

And when the Europeans went to war with each other, the whole world was dragged in. Like them, we have come to believe that war is a way to settle disputes between nations. And like them, we expend huge sums of money on armaments. This must have a bearing on any new world order.

But not all European influence is bad. The greatest contribution of the Europeans to the world is the introduction of systematic and universal education. Prior to this, education in even the most advanced non-European civilizations was about religion and philosophy. While these were important, they did not directly lead to progress and development. It is the Europeans who introduced what we may call secular education in which the focus is on facts and scientific truth together with mathematical accuracy rather than on spiritual and social values. True, much of this knowledge originated in Asia, but the separation between truth and fantasy was made by the Europeans.

As secular education spread throughout the world the mystery of progress and development was solved and it became possible for the rest of the world to develop. To succeed in life one no longer had to rely on omens and fate, but could largely design the route by accessing knowledge.

Secular education is a great leveler and soon the rest of the world was able to catch up with the Europeans. Very quickly the East Asians in particular were able to do almost everything that the Europeans could do. Mastery of science, technology and mathematics enabled East Asians to grow their industries and develop their countries until the gap between them and the Europeans was largely reduced. As we shall see, this equalization between the capacities of East Asia and Europe will affect the shape and character of the new world order.

After Japan was defeated in World War Two one condition imposed by the US and Europeans was that Japan could not spend more than 1 percent of its gross domestic product on its defense forces. That was in 1946 when Japan was bankrupt, thus 1 percent of Japan’s GDP was practically nil. Today, 1 percent of Japan’s GDP is probably bigger than what most European countries spend on defense. Japanese military power can therefore now match its economic power and, by extension, its influence over the world.

There is no such restriction on other countries. Thus, if China, for example, spends just 1 percent of its GDP on defense it would already become a great military power. The likelihood, of course, is that China spent more than 1 percent on defense. Again, this means that China’s influence on the world and its future can be very considerable.

Japan, China, South Korea and India have all become richer than in the heyday of European domination and their wealth, and thus their military strength and international influence, are capable of matching those of the West. A military confron-
tation between East and West could literally destroy the whole world. This is no longer an option.

The European powers, in particular the United States — presently the greatest military power in the world — must accept that things have changed. The old equation no longer holds true. Western hegemony cannot be sustained. Like it or not, ethnic Europeans must accept that if there is to be a new world order, the emergence of the new powers in Asia must be given due consideration.

There must be a sharing of power between East and West, between Europeans and non-Europeans. There is now much talk about this among both Europeans and Asians. The ideal would be a smooth devolution into a new world order without the need for confrontation and violence.

There has been some talk about a so-called G-2 (Group of 2) world dominated by the US and China. If our experience of the Cold War confrontation between the US and the former Soviet Union is anything to go by, a smooth sharing of power is not likely to happen.

Countries of the Third World have only recently gained their independence. I do not think they would relish the idea of a world dominated by two great powers any more than they did a world dominated by one great power.

During the Cold War they had to seek protection from one or the other of the two superpowers. Will they now have to align themselves with one or the other of the G-2 powers?

Besides, there is still Russia, a resuscitated world power. It is not going to stand on the sidelines and watch the US and China shape the new world order. It will want to play a major role and have its opinions sought as the new world order is defined.

If the weak nations were asked to state their preferences, I think they would prefer not having any world powers dictating to them. They would want a truly democratic world centered, perhaps, on the United Nations with no one having veto power. They would opt for decisions based on majority interest rather than the might of nations. Unfortunately, this is not what we can envision. The weak will still have to submit to the strong.

From what I see of the present situation, we can envision a world that is slightly less Eurocentric, with European influences moderated by the emergence of powerful Asian economies with growing military clout. If common sense prevails, the transition will be gradual and smooth. But common sense has no place in international relations. The rivalry will still go on as each of the three great powers — the US, China and Russia — maneuvers to promote its interests. That is the way of the world.

How would this less Eurocentric world order impact on the Digital Age? The forces that make the Digital Age, which have been able largely to resist pressures from the politically or militarily powerful, will continue to mature whatever shape the new world order takes. This is because the intellects that shape the Digital Age are very mobile and much influenced by the compensation they receive. As a result, there has been a massive and growing brain drain from the poor countries to the rich. Without a doubt, this will result in the poor getting poorer and the rich richer. The Digital Age is thus going to see even more lopsided development and greater disparities between the rich and poor.

In the rich countries, the brains behind the Digital Age may be employed in developing new ideas for the general good. But they may also be used to develop unhealthy ideas such as those currently found in the financial markets, or to invent...
new weapons to kill more efficiently. All these things are already happening, of course, but as the Digital Age develops, we can expect more abuses in the future of the brains behind the Digital Age.

Currently, we are also facing a financial and economic crisis. Some of the smartest people in the world have used the computer to work out schemes for making money without producing any goods or creating employment. By promoting absolute freedom of the marketplace they have abused the financial system to make tons of money for themselves. Unless governments restore their power to rule, the Digital Age will bring more such disasters to the world.

Of greater consequence are the implications of the Digital Age on the new world order itself. Obviously, the rich and powerful will be able to make greater use of the knowledge of the Digital Age because money is needed to do research into new technologies. Digitization has enabled greater precision in every product or application. Thus, it is possible for a space station to be placed in a pre-designated location in outer space and for a shuttle to dock with it. The mathematics of the Digital Age are very precise, because finding the moving space station in the vastness of space is far harder than finding a needle in a haystack.

Just as miraculous is the digitization of sound and color so that reproduction is perfect and does not fade even over very long periods of time.

Cameras are now carried by satellites that can take very high resolution pictures of earthly objects, including human beings. Already, data on almost everyone is carried on microchips and electronic records. With the ability to take clear pictures from satellites there will be no privacy for anyone. The data collected on any person can be incriminating. The government or agency that collects this data will be in a position to blackmail people.

It could be akin to the world described in George Orwell’s novel, 1984, where everyone is under scrutiny and Big Brother uses information to control virtually everything. Already we are being fingerprinted, tracked by GPS, undressed electronically and scanned by powerful machines. Will the rich and powerful nations collect and store data on people in order to control them? What we are seeing today in the war on terrorism is not very reassuring.

These are the implications of having a new world order in the Digital Age.

Actually, present day human civilization seems barely able to cope with the technological advances that we have already achieved. Certainly our superior knowledge of science and technology has not created a world order of peace and prosperity worthy of the human race. As the Digital Age advances, as new knowledge becomes available to more and more people, our capacity to bring order to a new world may not be adequate. The Digital Age has outstripped our civilization.

In envisioning the new world order, I wish I could be optimistic. Unfortunately, I cannot. We are really still a primitive people.