History Isn’t Dead Yet: Asia and the Return of Geopolitics
By Walter Russell Mead

The geopolitical challenges of 2014 from ISIS to the Ukraine, China’s maritime claims to North Korea, aggression might seem to indicate that the dominant liberal world order is in trouble. The geopolitical conflicts are real, writes Walter Russell Mead, but states must still buy into the liberal system in order to ride the inevitable, tidal forces of global capitalism. But it won’t be easy. In other words, if we reach ‘the end of history,’ it will be a victory hard fought and hard won.

THE EVENTFUL YEAR of 2014 found the world stage full of old-fashioned geopolitical conflicts, and Asia sits at the center. The fall of the Soviet Union was supposed to ring in a fundamentally new, post-historical world order, yet a quarter of a century later geopolitical competition is becoming more central to world politics, not less. Rather than being dominated by diplomats and economists orchestrating lofty and peaceful initiatives aimed at deepening the world order, the world scene is dominated by strong leaders whose irre- dentist, territorial, militaristic projects make sense only in the language of hard power.

China in the maritime regions adjoining its shores, Russia in Ukraine, and ISIS and Iran in the Middle East are seeking to revise the post-Cold War geopolitical settlement that looked to some like it would be permanent. The liberal ideology that we were told had won the competition to order the globe is relegated, more and more, to the sidelines as events in battle zones and international hotspots dominate the news.

When Communism fell, it seemed to many optimist observers as though capitalist democratic liberalism had no more serious challengers. The issues left for those in charge of global governance were primarily social and economic: halting climate change, working toward nuclear non-proliferation, promoting human rights, supporting women’s education, devising solutions for ending poverty and establishing a robust international rule of law. Those optimists, sadly, were wrong. This should not have been a surprise. The post-Cold War settlement was geopolitical in nature, and it was designed under the assumption that once it answered all of the hard power issues, those answers would be final. But China, Russia, Iran and large groups of Islamists never accepted that post-Cold War order. Those who assumed that the world could move on without accounting for the revisionist powers fundamentally misread what had happened. The modern liberal order still has challengers: Some of the geopolitical actors of 2014, such as China and Russia, are working to revise it, and others, such as ISIS, fundamentally want to overturn it. Iran falls somewhere in between. ISIS wants to undo the post-Westphalian order on a global scale; China, Russia and Iran, on the other hand, simply never assented to the legitimacy of the new order. They want to bring about a neo-Westphalian era of empires and princes.

President Vladimir Putin in Russia is not interested in installing Stalinism around the world, he is interested in imposing Putinism on as much of Russia and Eastern Europe as he can get away with. He is, in short, a tsar. President Xi Jinping in China is working very hard and very effectively to make himself the single most powerful man in China since Mao. Iran’s Ayatollah Khame- nei wants to use a nuclear program to establish his country as something like a superpower, and to install a large theocracy in the real world. ISIS has the same agenda but has even bigger plans and a much more sinister ideology. Yet with all of this going on, it is still entirely unclear that Western and liberal leaders and thinkers today understand this or know what to do about it.

TROUBLE AND THE STATUS QUO
Nowhere is the return of geopolitics more present than in Asia. A rising China has made it very clear that it intends to act like rising powers do: It is working to enforce irredentist territorial claims, it is using money and might to secure the resources that its ravenous industrial machine needs, and it is generally moving to establish itself as both a regional and a global superpower. China’s designs on its coastal waters, which are leading to clashes over what are often described in the media as “a bunch of rocks,” are more important to China and more dangerous to the world than many people understand.

Reclaiming the area inside what Chinese maps call the Nine-Dash Line is an emotional issue for a people who are still smarting from what they perceive as a humiliating 19th century demotion from a global empire to a second-rate nation. It is also a very useful political tool for consolidating power at the very top of the party leadership. The Nine-Dash Line circumscribes pretty much all of the South China Sea, parts of which are also claimed by Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia. It is not just diplomats and state officials who are invested in the issue; it is also the people of the region. Tensions are so high at this point that every instance of the ramming of a boat or moving of an oil rig could set off deadly protests, as has happened in Viet- nam. In the Philippines, police recently thwarted a terrorist attack on the airport in Manila whose perpetrators were allegedly motivated by opposition to their government’s “soft stance” on China’s maritime aggression.

As bad as things are in the South China Sea, the biggest single potential flashpoint is in the East China Sea, where the Japanese claim sovereignty over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. Most of the maritime clashes, which involve dangerously ramming coast guard and even fishing vessels and firing powerful water cannons, really started when Japan nationalized two of the Senkakus in 2012. Tokyo claims that this was an innocuous move made in order to keep private Japanese interests from developing the islands. But China, at least rhetorically, claims it was an unacceptable breach of an unwritten agreement not to break
the status quo. China and Japan are now not only playing out their conflict on the water but also in the air, with jet fighters performing dangerous flybys of one another, avoiding politically disastrous crashes by only a few meters. Whipping up nationalist fervor has had the predictable result: According to a recent poll, a majority of people in China and nearly a third in Japan expect to see a war between the two nations.

Tokyo, in response, has been very clear that it is not going to lose its position as the top power in the region without a fight. Japan has made more and more assertive counterclaims, and it is moving to back them up with a revision of how it interprets its constitutional limits on military involvement. Smaller powers such as Vietnam are no less actively opposed to China’s agenda than is Japan. In fact, one unwelcome result of Beijing’s expansionist strategy is proving to be the forging of some kind of alliance between its regional opponents, potentially including Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and India.

The Asian problems stemming from China are not limited to the coast: North Korea’s leadership seems as insecure and aggressive as it ever has been, and it also seems to have maintained its protective client-state relationship with Beijing. North Korea is as serious a geopolitical threat as any, and its maritime aggression and border disputes both predate China’s agenda and are often more seriously warlike.

India is trying to break onto the world stage under the leadership of its new, nationalistic president, Narendra Modi. He is doing his best to involve India in the region as a major power without aligning too much with any one side. Modi has so far been successful at winning favor with Japan through his close relationship with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe while also moving along with plans to secure Chinese infrastructure investment.

The Middle East has ignited, and this, too, means trouble for Asia. The rise of Islamist violence is not an exclusively Middle Eastern phenomenon, but that the historical conflict may well be coming to a head in the Middle East is a problem. China has suffered a number of Islamist terror attacks, and as a result Beijing is cracking down hard on the restive Uighur majority in Xinjiang province. This is a ripple effect of the problems roiling to the west. One of the biggest threats to global security stemming from the troubles in the Middle East is that if things continue to devolve, the world’s oil supply is in serious trouble. Russia is more Asian and less European than many in the West understand, and it is working quite diligently to subvert the tenuous gains that the liberal order has made since the fall of the Soviet Union. Putin’s is probably the most advanced revisionist agenda right now. Even as optimists in the West still behave as though they live in a world with only soft-power problems faster than anybody can handle. His strategy in Ukraine seems to be as effective as it is subversive: he is keeping Ukraine in enough turmoil that his sphere of influence continues to grow even as his oil and gas become less available and more apparently necessary in Europe. So far, the Western sanctions and NATO bluster that have been wheeled out as a response have been ineffective.

HISTORY IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

It is nearly 25 years since Francis Fukuyama penned his book The End of History and The Last Man. It is tempting as well as depressing to see the current state of affairs as a substantive refutation of his thesis that the post-Cold War moment represented the final victory of liberalism worldwide. The reality is not quite that simple.

One cannot divorce the theoretical aspect of history from the practical aspect of geopolitics, and Fukuyama does not try to. His prediction was not that the end of history has come, but rather that it is imminent. Even when it does come, the second part of Fukuyama’s book (as well as Hegel’s theory) predicts that competition and conflict will continue to play out. One cannot blame the optimists for their hope, but neither Hegel nor Fukuyama were ever blindly optimistic.

According to this infinitely more defensible Hegelian understanding of Fukuyama’s pronouncement on history, practically speaking, states must buy into the liberal system in order to be able to ride the inevitable, tidal forces of informational and industrial capitalism. The logic of this system is complex but complete, and no state or for that matter body of religious believers can ignore it entirely. There is no other way. To be an instrumental part of the modern world — in other words, to make history rather than to weather it — societies still must buy in.

But taking the world through the transition from history to postmodernity remains a rough challenge. Moving into the post-history that the contemporary liberal world order represents is anathema to the leaders of the revisionist powers, and they will do whatever they can to forestall or reverse the process.

For example: To grow into a real superpower, China will inevitably have to master a host of problems that Western societies have already conquered. Hopeful though that may sound, it does not go so far as to expect that China’s path to postmodernity will be any less painful and tumultuous than Germany’s was. It will be a rocky process of political and economic development. They all are.

In the places where history is already over — that is, the West and its strong allies in Asia and around the world — people characteristically fail to comprehend the mindsets of people in the parts of the world where history is still happening. With Putin’s ongoing adventures, we have already seen the West and its allies repeatedly underestimate and misunderstand the power that the supposedly backwards and primitive societies of the world can bring to bear. That is a real weakness, and it can undercut the power advantage that the liberal world enjoys.

The end of history is both closer and farther away than the leaders and people of the liberal world realize, because they do not recognize the might with which the revisionists will resist being dragged along into postmodernity. Russia and China and their ilk will not simply cede to the theoretical inexorability of liberal capitalist democracy. If we reach the end of history, it will be a victory hard fought and hard won. It will be a victory that comes from a concerted campaign to understand and to defeat, with both carrots and sticks, the likes of Putin and Khamenei and ISIS and the Chinese Communist Party. And once that is done, the work of maintaining a global order will still not be fully over.

We must always keep in mind that as much as it is true that liberal democratic capitalist societies are powerful because the victory of their ideology is inevitable, it is also true that the victory of their ideology is inevitable because they are powerful.

Walter Russell Mead is James Clarke Chace Professor of Foreign Affairs and the Humanities at Bard College and Editor-at-large and Director of The American Interest Online. He is the author of a number of books, including Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk (2004) and God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World (2008).