

Technocracy replaces philosophy

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LONDON - Among the unending flood of global news in recent weeks, there was one item that received almost no media comment but which could in the longer run be the most significant of all.

This was the reported remark by U.S. President Donald Trump, while in Hanoi, that if Kim Jong Un would play ball in halting his nuclear program, then America would assist in turning his North Korean “hermit” nation into another Vietnam.

Vietnam? Surely not. There must be some mistake. Was not Vietnam the place where 55,000 American soldiers died almost half a century ago in a vain effort to stop the Vietnam domino falling into the grip of the spreading communist dictatorship? Was it not in the very front line in the world struggle between freedom and tyranny, individual liberty and state tyranny?

But, no, there was no mistake. Trump, with his famous transactional mindset, was looking past and through the slogans of yesterday and discerning utterly changed conditions on the ground. There is plenty to criticize Trump for as he keeps playing the openly populist tune back in Washington. But it could be that in this instance he and his advisors are seeing the real world more clearly than the armies of analysts, party politicians, academics and ideologues who love to fight the battles of long ago.

For, of course, what lies behind the Trump view of things, and maybe the view prevailing through at least the two-thirds of humanity who populate modern, fast-rising Asia, is that the left-right ideological struggle is over and that in the digital age it is technocracy and technology that now reign supreme.

The Vietnamese government calls Vietnam a “Socialist Republic.” In practice it now has strong capitalist characteristics. Is it therefore a free economy or a socialist planned economy? The answer is neither. Is it moving toward the Western model of democracy and market economics? If this means weak and volatile government, widening inequalities, slow growth, lagging infrastructure, rising crime and frequent street protests, the answer is “no” to that, too.

The truth is that the political vocabulary of Western societies and institutions, the political dialectic evolving over the last 200 years or more, cannot explain the patterns of governance now emerging around the world. The words are just not there. A digitally empowered and connected populace is now in a position to demand, insistently and continuously, outcomes that may well contradict each other but just do not fit into the old spectrum of right and left that still shapes much of the Western political colloquy.

Instead, the desired new goal can best be labeled “quality government.” That translates into calls for the highest quality education, much better health care,

homes, real gender equality, security, law and order on the streets, jobs for the young, care for the old, a fresh and clean environment, water and reliable energy, a good supply of dignity and identity recognition, and riddance of corruption, which is always the telling and fatal mark of bad governance.

Where systems and regimes can deliver on these fronts, political stability is going to prevail. Where the system is too slow to realize that the people are now in power, protest and the populist virus will inevitably take over.

In the West, certainly in Europe and America, this is already happening. Long stable democracies are grappling with completely unfamiliar new forces and threats. Old political parties, formed around the axis of past debates, are breaking up.

Modern Asia has its quarrels and challenges, but it also has the chance to leapfrog the Western experience and carve out new political paths. The new emerging pattern might be labeled techno-democracy. It requires neither a coercive state too strong and oppressive, nor a state too weak to regulate and administer the rule of law evenly and firmly.

The great causes of freedom and liberty, for which the West has expended so much blood and treasure, are not dead but require restating in the language and concepts of successive generations. So asserts one of the great defenders of individual freedom under the old order — Friedrich Hayek, in his massive “bible,” “The Constitution of Liberty.”

But Hayek lived before the ubiquity of the cellphone, the internet, the World Wide Web and the age of connectivity and transparency they bring. These things rewrite the whole score. They reallocate the sources of power somewhere new between the state and the individual. They propel socialist and once divided Vietnam into new types of capitalism. They could yet do the same for a united Korea. They are even now in China itself allowing technocratic governance to shred the old doctrines and “isms” of one-party rule.

Trump is an unlikely herald of this new pragmatic order. And anyway, in his own words, he wants to keep America out of more foreign ventures. But at least when he travels abroad he shakes off some of the theories and dogmas that are paralyzing Western institutions and political progress. And for that there should perhaps be a small moment of thanks.