

From: Lesley Groff <[REDACTED]>

To: Jeffrey Epstein <jeevacation@gmail.com>

Subject: Fwd: Larry Summers - Foreign Affairs - The Fusion of Civilizations

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Begin forwarded message:

From: Kelly Friendly <[REDACTED]>

Subject: Larry Summers - Foreign Affairs - The Fusion of Civilizations

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To: [REDACTED]

Reply-To: [REDACTED]



The Fusion of Civilizations

The Case for Global Optimism

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By Kishore Mahbubani and Lawrence H. Summers

The mood of much of the world is grim these days. Turmoil in the Middle East, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of refugees; random terrorist attacks across the globe; geopolitical tensions in eastern Europe and Asia; the end of the commodity supercycle; slowing growth in China; and economic stagnation in many countries-all have combined to feed a deep pessimism about the present and, worse, the future.

Historians looking back on this age from the vantage point of later generations, however, are likely to be puzzled by the widespread contemporary feelings of gloom and doom. By most objective measures of human well-being, the past three decades have been the best in history. More and more people in more and more places are enjoying better lives than ever before. Nor is this an accident-because despite Samuel Huntington's foreboding, what has occurred over recent generations is not a clash of civilizations but a fusion of civilizations.

To put it simply, the great world civilizations, which used to have detached and separate identities, now have increasingly overlapping areas of commonality. Most people around the world now have the same aspirations as the Western middle classes: they want their children to get good educations, land good jobs, and live happy, productive lives as members of stable, peaceful communities. Instead of feeling depressed, the West should be celebrating its phenomenal success at injecting the key elements of its worldview into other great civilizations.

The march of reason, triggered in the West by the Enlightenment, is spreading globally, leading to the emergence of pragmatic problem-solving cultures in every region and making it possible to envisage the emergence of a stable and sustainable rules-based order. There is every reason to believe, moreover, that the next few decades can be even better for humanity than the last few—so long as the West does not lose confidence in its core values and retreat from global engagement. The greatest danger of the current pessimism, therefore, is that it might become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to fear and withdrawal rather than attempts to reinvigorate the existing global system.

The origins of the contemporary era lie in the West's transformation during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. No other civilization can take credit for giving birth to modernity. This was not done with some benign intent to uplift humanity in general; there were many problems along the way, and the explosion of Western power across the globe had some terrible consequences for other cultures and regions. Yet the ultimate result was the diffusion of a modern outlook that relies on science and rationality to solve problems, much to the ultimate benefit of the planet's population.

As recently as half a century ago, for example, there was a global clash of economic ideologies. Nikita Khrushchev, the former leader of the Soviet Union, could claim that the state was better at delivering basic goods to citizens than free markets were, but today such a view would be laughed at. The market economy has made Chinese and Indian workers today far more productive than they were under Mao Zedong or Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. Societies now accept the simple fact that workers need material incentives to be productive, which has led to increased dignity and self-worth. The vast majority of humanity is literate, is at least somewhat mobile, and has access to the world's store of existing knowledge. Around half of the adults in the world own a smartphone, and there are now more connected mobile devices in total than there are people on the planet.

The spread of science and technology, meanwhile, has also improved human dignity and well-being. Most people used to experience lives that were nasty, brutish, and short. Today, life expectancy has increased by leaps and bounds virtually everywhere. Infant and maternal mortality have dropped sharply, thanks in part to the spread of clear hygiene standards and the construction of modern hospitals. According to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as recently as 1988, polio was rampant in 125 countries;

today that number is down to two. Aside from among the Taliban and a few pockets of upscale communities in the United States, the virtues of vaccines are accepted by all, part of a general consensus on the virtues of Western science and technology.

And reason is replacing superstition more generally. People around the world now routinely do basic cost-benefit analyses when looking for solutions to problems, leading to a gradual improvement in outcomes everywhere, from agriculture and construction to social and political life. This helps explain the dramatic long-term decline in the rates of most kinds of conflict and violence that the Harvard scholar Steven Pinker has documented.

After slavery and imprisonment, the most degrading condition a human being can experience is poverty. In 2000, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced as one of the ambitious Millennium Development Goals halving extreme global poverty by 2015. That goal was far exceeded, and the U.S. National Intelligence Council has predicted that extreme poverty will be reduced even further by 2030-which would constitute one of the most remarkable developments in human history. The global middle class, meanwhile, is projected to rise from 1.8 billion in 2009 to 3.2 billion in 2020 and 4.9 billion in 2030. The world's infant mortality rate decreased from an estimated 63 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 32 in 2015. This translates into more than four million fewer infant deaths each year.

Instead of optimism based on this recent progress, however, these days in the West, one more often encounters pessimism related to three current challenges: turbulence in the Islamic world, the rise of China, and intra-Western economic and political sclerosis. But the pessimism is unwarranted, because none of these three challenges is insurmountable.

MODERNIZING MUSLIMS

The Islamic world, from Morocco to Indonesia, comprises 1.6 billion citizens-more than one in five people on the planet. The vast majority of them share the common global aspirations to modernize their societies, achieve middle-class living standards, and lead peaceful, productive, and fulfilling lives.

Contrary to what some assert, Islam is fully compatible with modernization. When Malaysia built the Petronas Towers and Dubai built Burj Khalifa, they were not just erecting physical structures but also sending a metaphysical message: we want to be part of the modern world in all dimensions. Many Islamic societies have educated their women. In Malaysian universities, the women outnumber the men 65 percent to 35 percent. Even some Islamic countries that were initially reluctant to embrace modernization have begun to do so. For example, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates now feature satellite campuses of major Western universities. One reason for the shift is that the experience of other regions, such as Asia, has shown that modernization does not simply equal westernization-that it is possible to pursue, say, economic

and social development while still retaining distinctive cultural characteristics.

It is true that a certain number of young Muslims will continue to choose rebellion against the modern world rather than integration into it, joining radical Islamist groups and trying to wreak havoc where they can. About 30,000 Muslim fighters from all over the world, including the West, have joined the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). But however much they constitute a major global security problem, they are dwarfed by, say, the 200 million nonradical Muslims who live peacefully in Indonesia alone. Indonesia has elected two consecutive leaders committed to integrating the country into the modern world, and its largest Muslim organization, the 50-million-plus-member Nahdlatul Ulama, has publicly challenged ISIS' actions and ideology.

The real challenge, therefore, is not the Islamic world per se but figuring out how to bolster the pro-modernization trends in that world while containing the radical trend. In retrospect, it was a mistake for the West to have remained silent when Saudi funding dramatically increased the number of radical madrasahs around the world. A comparable investment today in building a good modern school next to each radical one would create a contest for legitimacy that would likely spread Enlightenment values far and wide. Such a program could be undertaken by the UN agencies UNESCO and UNICEF at relatively modest cost, and it is only one of many possible lines of advance in attacking the problem.

CHALLENGING CHINESE

The second great challenge many worry about is the rise of China. China's success, however, can also be seen as the ultimate triumph of the West. The emperor Qianlong famously wrote to Great Britain's King George III in 1793 saying, "Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There [is] therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce." Two centuries later, the Chinese understand that absorbing Western modernity into their society has been crucial to their country's reemergence. It has led to rapid economic growth, new and gleaming infrastructure, triumphs in space exploration, the spectacular 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, and much more.

Even as Chinese society has accepted modernity with great enthusiasm, however, it has not abandoned its Chinese cultural roots. The Chinese look at their modern Chinese civilization and emphasize its Chineseness, seeing no contradiction. Indeed, China is now experiencing its own cultural renaissance, fueled by its new affluence.

The duality of the Chinese story is reflected in the West's schizophrenic response to it. The Nixon administration eagerly sought better relations with China under Mao, and when Deng Xiaoping doubled down by opening up the country, the West applauded the change. The United States generously accepted Chinese products into its markets, allowed massive

trade surpluses, welcomed China into the World Trade Organization in 2001, and kept global sea-lanes open so that China could trade freely. All of this enabled China to emerge as the world's number one trading power by 2013. The United States also generously allowed more than a million Chinese students to study in its universities.

Yet the rise of China has also led to deep fears. China continues to be run by a communist party that has no desire to embrace liberal democracy. China has displayed a belligerent side in some of its dealings with Japan and some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations over territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas. The possibility of an aggressive, militaristic China cannot be ruled out.

But we have come a vast distance since the days when Mao openly talked about the possibility of winning a nuclear war, and Chinese history suggests that Beijing will ultimately prefer to join, rather than replace or reject, the current rules-based order that the West has created. As the world's number one trading power, China has the most to lose from a breakdown of the global economic system. Historically, moreover, what the Chinese have feared most is luan (chaos). This might lead to heavy-handed efforts to preserve order domestically, but it should lead Beijing to support a rules-based order at the global level as well. Undoubtedly, as China grows more powerful, it will become more assertive. This has happened. But since China needs a few more decades of peace to complete its modernization, it has strong reasons to restrain itself militarily and avoid a conflict.

Chinese society will never become a replica of Western society. China's own culture is too rich to be absorbed into any other cultural universe. Yet a modernizing China will feature overlapping aspirations in many areas, as, for example, with the rapid spread of Western classical music. In 2008, 36 million Chinese children were studying the piano (six times the number of U.S. children doing so), and another 50 million were studying the violin. Some Chinese cities can fill the halls of 15 opera houses in one evening.

A modern China with thriving Western classical orchestras and Western-style universities provides a powerful demonstration of the fusion of civilizations. Western statesmen should allow this dynamic to gain momentum while remaining patient on other areas of change, such as in the political realm. China's development will not necessarily be linear, but in the long run, it should continue in a positive direction.

PESSIMISTIC POPULISTS

The third challenge today is a widespread loss of confidence in the West about its own systems and future potential. Sluggish growth across the developed world, stagnant incomes for much of the population, rising economic inequality, political gridlock, and the emergence of populist insurgencies on both sides of the political spectrum have fueled a widespread sense that Western models of governance and economic management are floundering.

Many of these problems are real and important. But they are not beyond the capacity of determined leadership to solve, nor do they represent fundamental weaknesses of the Western model. So the pessimism strikes us as dramatically overdone, like previous bouts of declinism and worry that the West's best days were past. The greatest danger, in fact, is that the widespread pessimism will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gloomy Western policymakers and publics are more likely to see threats than opportunities and to turn away from the world rather than continue to lead it successfully.

This is notable in the rising opposition, for example, to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a major trade deal that would help extend and deepen the liberal order across a broad swath of the globe. It is evident in the increasing suspicion of immigrants and refugees and in the growing support for closing borders. And it can be seen in the fraying and potential unraveling of international institutions such as the European Union, formerly a model of progressive international integration.

It would be a terrible shame if the West walked away from the very international order that it created after World War II and that has facilitated so much security, prosperity, and development over the decades. Instead, it should try to reinvigorate that order, with three moves in particular: working with China and India, bolstering international rules, and accentuating the positive global trends that get lost in all the hysteria about the negative ones.

Why China and India? Because they have the largest populations and economies in the developing world, are led by strong, reform-minded leaders, and are approaching the future with dynamism, optimism, and hope. Both understand that they need to take on greater responsibilities in confronting global problems, and as last fall's Paris climate agreement demonstrates, they are already starting to do so.

Although China's rise has been one of the universally acknowledged wonders of the age, India's recent rise has been impressive as well, as India, too, has embraced modernization, globalization, and Enlightenment rationalism. Along the way, India has maintained the world's largest democracy, successfully accommodated an amazingly diverse cultural and demographic mosaic, and kept its head and its values even under repeated terrorist attacks.

Although both are Asian powers, they differ so much that developing the capacity to work closely with both, and learning from each, would be a major step forward in mastering the management of a truly global order. The rapid spread of Western-style universities and orchestras in China will provide new bridges between China and the West. The exceptionally successful ethnic Indian community in the United States will provide bridges with India. And all this cooperation will accentuate the process of civilizational fusion.

In contrast to China and India, Russia has held back from thoroughly embracing modernity, even though the Soviet Union started modernizing before China and India. Russia hesitated to join the World Trade Organization and has not yet accepted that ungrudging participation in the current rules-based order can facilitate its own progress. The more Beijing and New Delhi prosper, however, the more persuasive will be the case for Moscow to follow their lead.

As it works closely with the major developing powers, the West should also step up its efforts to construct a robust rules-based world in general. In 2003, former U.S. President Bill Clinton said that Americans should try "to create a world with rules and partnerships and habits of behavior that we would like to live in when we're no longer the military, political, economic superpower in the world." If Clinton's fellow citizens could accept such advice, the citizens of most other countries would be willing to do the same. And this might be easier to achieve than many believe.

Much of today's global multilateral architecture was a valuable gift from the West to the world. Yet the major Western powers have also made sure that these institutions have never grown strong enough or independent enough to make real trouble for their creators. UN secretary-generals have been creatures of the permanent members of the Security Council, the leaders of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been drawn exclusively from the United States and Europe, and dominance in these financial institutions has occasionally been exploited to achieve extra-financial goals. These policies should be reconsidered, for the legitimacy of the system depends on the perception that its rules are developed by and applied fairly and equally to all, rather than that they cater to the narrow interests of a few. Picking strong leaders for the major international institutions and keeping those institutions' operations from being undermined or politicized would be a major step forward.

Western policymakers, finally, should work to highlight the good things that are happening around the world rather than harp on the bad things. Hundreds of millions of people have emerged from poverty in recent decades even as military conflicts have decreased. The convergence of global aspirations means that a vast majority of countries want to see evolution trump revolution in the reshaping of the global architecture. The appearance of pressing transnational problems should drive a convergence of interests toward cooperation in finding common solutions. And the presence of large, well-educated middle classes in countries around the globe will help keep governments on the right track.

There is every reason to be confident that the condition of the world will continue to improve as pragmatism and the use of reason become universal. Western universities have been a crucial driver of this trend. It is not just that their curricula have been copied around the world; the entire ecosystem of a modern research university is being replicated, and it is the graduates of these Western-style universities who have in turn introduced modern methods into education, public health, economic management, and public policy more generally. Global management consulting firms

have also contributed to progress, spreading best practices and good ideas from the West to "the rest," and increasingly from the rest back to the West. As a result, even formerly desperate and dysfunctional countries, such as Bangladesh and Ethiopia, are now confidently entering the modern universe.

In short, despite the daily headlines that scream doom and gloom, the world is actually coming together, not falling apart. So far, the fusion of civilizations has been driven primarily by the injection of Western DNA into other civilizations. Over time, the flow of culture and ideas is likely to go in both directions. This has already happened in cuisine, where global influences have thoroughly penetrated Western kitchens, and something similar should happen across cultural sectors.

There will be challenges. There could even be major setbacks. The fusion of civilizations and the social and economic changes associated with it can seem threatening to some, creating opportunities for demagogues to exploit popular fears, even in the heart of the advanced industrial world. But increasingly open and enlightened societies are likely to avoid this danger. In the twenty-first century, the world will be governed more by the authority of ideas than by the idea of authority. In short, the progressive direction of human history, which has lifted the human condition to heights never seen before, is set to continue.



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