

9/11

We should be cautious of ever attaching too much importance to any single historical event. It was not Gavrilo Princip, the man who assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914, who started World War I. Rather it was an insanely elaborate web of alliances, about as artificially secure as a Maginot line, that waited for a single domino to set the train in motion.

Similarly, with the power of hindsight, it is almost entertaining to reflect on the excitable commentators – eight years ago this week – who began talking about World War III as the dust from the twin towers in New York was still settling. Tragic and spectacular though 9/11 was, that event was far less of a turning point than is generally believed.

These days, mainstream historians infer a nonlinear and decidedly non-Newtonian arrow of time. In other words, history does not move in neat straight lines like billiard balls, changing direction only when struck. History is more like the passage of clouds, constantly in flux, never predictable. That quality, which is known as the butterfly effect in chaos theory, is what makes it impossible to predict exactly where we will be five years from now, let alone in a hundred years.

The analogy of history and clouds sheds light on something else. The weather is hard to forecast – a butterfly's flapping wings in one part of the world could in theory at least cause a chain of events that results in a hurricane in another part. However, the range of possible weathers is not infinitely large. While it may not rain tomorrow, we know that if it does, it will rain water, not cats and dogs. It may not be quite as warm as yesterday, but we know that it will not be minus 10 degrees.

In other words, 9/11 was the historical equivalent of a violent and unpredictable storm – a tsunami in a very real sense in both its immediate impact and long-term repercussions. But the storm did not alter the fact that summer was slowly turning into autumn. In just the same way, the attacks on New York and Washington, however shocking, did not alter the direction of several underlying historical trends. In many respects, the world is not that different in 2009 from a parallel world as it would have evolved under the influence of those trends, even had the attacks not happened.

The first deep trend is obvious enough: the spread of terrorism and the use of violence by non-state organizations in the pursuit of extreme political goals. This kind of terrorism has been around for quite a while. In 1983, Hezbollah attacked the United States marine barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 Americans who were part of a multinational peacekeeping force (a simultaneous attack on the French base killed 58 paratroopers). And hijacking planes was certainly not a novel tactic either: the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) first began to use that method systematically in the late 1960s. And in a sense, the PLO was merely emulating the thousands of Japanese pilots who flew their planes directly at populous targets in desperate kamikaze missions towards the end of World War II.

All that was really new on 9/11 was that these tried-and-tested tactics were applied in combination and in the United States. In other words, it was the successful extension of international terrorism to the United States that was the novelty.

This in turn has sparked a growing interest in the history of terrorism, of Muslims in general, of international cultural conflicts and exchanges. More importantly, this has encouraged a reappraisal of the history of foreign policy, particularly with a black president in the White House, with less emphasis on the cold war and more on post-colonial politics. The Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981 have become significant turning points in ways that they had not been before.

To be sure, history is never set in stone; it is written and rewritten by each generation almost with the whimsical course of a butterfly's path. This is why, with the eighth anniversary of 9/11 this week, it has become possible, even useful, to watch the video footage of those events without re-imagining the terrible scenes of that day.

It's not so much that the video imagery has lost its emotional force: for the true power of the film footage lies less in what it shows – airplane crashes and imploding buildings – than in what we do not actually see, namely, the death, despair and suffering that took place beyond our sight in those planes and buildings.

However, we can finally look beyond the crash and collapse sequences to understand the underlying causes of the frustrations on both sides of the conflict. Only with cool, intellectual detachment can the bigger picture emerge.

Showing Its True Colours

The US business cycle can be disconcerting to say the least. While there isn't a solid correlation between specific cyclical events and electoral results, the business cycle has always been largely determined by basic American political attitudes.

In the third quarter of 1929, Wall Street was brought down by the Great Crash and an economic recession began that lasted 43 months – or over three and a half years – until the first quarter of 1933. This was the greatest recession in history not so much because of its duration, but rather because the world had gone, seemingly overnight, from a time of giddy prosperity and excess to a period of profound depression, with unemployment in the industrialised countries reaching a quarter of the active population.

This was the first great crisis of capitalism.

Before the presidential election of 1932, America had largely been a conservative country, where the Republican Party was the party of business par excellence. Conservatives abhorred fiscal deficits and stood by the principle that the best remedy for economic depression was to let the business cycle run its course. This was very much a 19th-century view that was out of synch with a society that had witnessed such immense accumulation of wealth that it did not seem possible – or ethical – that there could be so much misery.

Then as now, the Republicans didn't have an economic leg to stand on from the moment it became clear to the electorate that it was the blinkered pro-business policies of conservatives that had put them and the rest of the world in this fine mess.

Franklin Roosevelt was voted in as the first Democrat in the White House in 21 years since Woodrow Wilson, and the American public became so overwhelmingly liberal that it took their greatest World War II general, Dwight Eisenhower, to unseat the Democrats in 1953. Indeed, few social historians disagree that Roosevelt, through his national pep talks on the radio, turned a majority of Americans into Democrats and into liberals – that is, supporting a compassionate, activist state, or what conservatives later took to calling “bleeding hearts”.

Liberalism is on the rise again in America on the back of the second great crisis of capitalism. John McCain is set to lose the election to a real bleeding-heart liberal, Barack Obama, who might not relish the label but who fits the description perfectly when he talks about “spreading the wealth”. This is the beginning of the Democrat decade, with profound implications for the world, including the Arab region.

Americans want out of the Iraqi tunnel, which lingers like a nightmare and, they understand and mostly agree with Obama's readiness to talk promptly and directly to the leaders of Iran and Syria. More to the point, though, they're done with the real threat of another great depression.

It's just a shame that Barack Obama isn't in fact Muslim, despite the constant barrage of innuendos by a desperate Republican fringe that has accompanied the presidential campaign from the start. There is already such a sense of amazement, excitement and even of disbelief in the Arab world that Americans could elect a black man whose father's family was of Muslim extraction. Just imagine the ripple effects if Barack Hussein Obama could have been sworn in – on a Koran no less – as the first Muslim president of the United States. After all, here is a man whose names evoke all the maniacal villains of the Bush administration: a surname that's easily confused with bin Laden's first name, a middle name that for most Americans immediately conjures up the hanged Butcher of Baghdad and, to top it all, a first name that rhymes with Iraq.

Picture, then, the potency of a Muslim at the White House. This would have brought to shame every single Arab country. In these old, encrusted and traditional societies, it is simply inconceivable that a Shiite could ever rule Saudi Arabia, a Copt could govern Egypt, or a Druze could become president of Lebanon.

But even as a Christian – only one of his grandparents was in fact Muslim – Obama does wonders to improve America's image in the Arab region; an image that has been severely tarnished by the Iraq war, the post-9/11 crusade, Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, to name a few. More than breaking the economic freefall and preventing another great depression, there is genuine hope that an Obama administration might trigger a sea change in America-Muslim world relations.

Of course, Arabs will always have their grievances with the US, but every so often, America does something so radical, so out of the ordinary that it revives America's revolutionary brand overseas in a way that a century of Bush years could never achieve. Let's hope the American voters won't let the world down.

Obama in Arabia

The Prophet Muhammad credited the final triumph of Islam to the single most unpopular act of his career: the surprise truce with his Quraishi enemies in Mecca in AD 628. Acting against the advice and sentiments of most of his followers, the Prophet maintained that history would show that the truce was the moment that Islam won the decade-long conflict with the pagan Arab tribes that had sought to destroy the new religion.

He was proved right.

Over the next few years following the peace treaty of al-Hudaybiyya, the trade boycott between the Muslims and the pagans was lifted and Islam was able to spread rapidly across the Arabian Peninsula. Islamic scholars estimate that the number of converts during that two-year period exceeded the entire size of the Muslim community of the preceding two decades. A simple handshake can shake up the world far more than a sword.

This is a lesson that Barack Obama appears to understand well as he navigates the international waters that were polluted by his predecessor. Back in the dark days of military and economic excesses under the Bush administration, many Arabs perceived America's war on global terrorism as a war against Islam and Muslims. By stark contrast, Obama has already discovered a very different Middle East – a multi-polar region where power is balanced between several actors.

Acknowledging that the war in Iraq had sown widespread Arab distrust of the West, Obama has affirmed that America will never be at war with Islam. Praising Islam's contributions to civilization, Obama has reiterated his desire for a new partnership, rooted not just in opposition to terrorism but in broader engagement based on common interest and mutual respect.

In this new, multi-polar Middle East, Iran, Turkey and Syria are being treated to varying degrees as regional powers with valid security and economic concerns. Syria has been encouraged to step in from the cold, while America's traditional allies in the region, such as Israel and Egypt, face being relegated to a second tier.

During his visit to Turkey last month – his first to a Muslim country as president – Obama hit all the right notes as he acknowledged his personal connection to Islam and his admiration of Arab accomplishments. He faces a Muslim world where he enjoys great respect but also one that has great expectations.

Like many others, Arabs are watching carefully to see how this charismatic president with his deep faith and commitment towards diversity and social justice not only talks but also walks, sits and, in fact, bows. In that last sense, much was made of Obama's apparent bow to the Saudi monarch, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, during their meeting at last month's G-20 summit in London. To his hardened critics, it was a flagrant act of subservience from one whose country depends on Saudi oil and money; to everyone else, it was a tactful and very human gesture from a taller man. The same detractors see Obama's efforts to reach out to world leaders like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez or Cuba's Raul Castro as more proof of his intent to undermine American power.

To be sure, the Obama administration has the wherewithal and rare window to act on a range of opportunities, which would strengthen America's image and respect in the Arab region. Chiefly, America is well placed to take a strong and unbiased position on the Palestinian-Israeli divide. Obama has invited both sides for talks in Washington in early June and even if he fails to kick-start negotiations, all eyes will be on the America president to see if he has the doggedness to act as honest broker, learning from the political improprieties of the Bush years.

Obama has also moved constructively in reaching out to Iran while staying firm in his concerns on the nuclear issue and on Iran's expanding influence, both of which continue to agitate the countries of the Gulf region.

But a major potential challenge will be avoiding the pitfalls of another Iraq in Afghanistan or even – if the Taliban continue to make gains in South Asia – another Afghanistan in Pakistan. Obama can score a success if America learns to work with local, regional and international stakeholders in order to create a more stable involvement. In other words, there is scope for a genuine coalition of the willing; one that seeks to promote peace and economic and educational development, rather than war.

Like Prophet Muhammad, whose grandson Hussein inspired his middle name, Obama has demonstrated that he is confident in his stance and in the values he represents. Obama understands that the best way to effect political change in other countries is through dialogue and trade. And his willingness to show courtesy to his opponents gives him the moral high ground when dealing with them, as well as with his critics at home.

The Power of Words

There was another, less obvious big winner in the recent US election: the English language. More than Obama's economic rescue plan, his pledge to transform America or even his inherent charm, it was his ability to communicate his vision so eloquently in English that electrified America; as a presidential candidate, even Kennedy's rhetoric was never as rousing or capable of capturing the popular imagination. Put another way, millions of Americans – particularly whites – would not have voted for Obama had he spoken English like most inner city blacks.

The lesson from the US election applies equally to the rest of the world; you need to master English if you want to succeed anywhere and in any domain, from business to science to air traffic control. Riding the crest of globalization and technology, English dominates the world to such a degree that it is the means of communication even for al-Qaeda between Arabic speakers and Islamists of other languages.

There may be more native speakers of Chinese, Spanish or Hindi, but it is English they speak when they talk across cultures, and English they teach their children to help them become citizens of an increasingly intertwined world. Hardly surprising, the teaching of English has become a multibillion-dollar industry, with almost one-third of the world's population studying the language at any given time. It has consolidated its dominance as the international language of business, science and the internet. By the most common estimates, half a billion people

speak English as a first language, 300-500 million others as a fluent second language, and as many as a billion others speak it as a foreign language.

However, that means that the vast majority of the world's people – three-quarters of the global population – do not speak English and are therefore at a disadvantage and unable to avail themselves of the resources of the information age. Some countries, including many in the Arab region, are also deeply resentful of the encroachment of the culture that comes with the language – from blue jeans and Mickey Mouse to movies and TV programs. For instance, last month, Iran became the latest country to try to fight the spread of English as a de facto global language when it sought to ban such English words as “pizza” and “chat”. This is reminiscent of a move in the 1990s by France's prestigious Académie française to replace 3000 English words with French counterparts. But the French proved too fond of their “weekends”, for example, to replace them with the awkward “fins de semaine”

Given this overwhelming dominance, could English ever be dethroned as the king of languages? Linguistic evolution will naturally continue to take its course over the centuries and some philologists maintain that English will eventually suffer the fate of past common languages, dying as Latin did, or Phoenician or Sanskrit before it.

But the world has changed so drastically that history may no longer be a faithful guide. Unlike previous lingua-francas, this is the first time that a language is spoken genuinely globally in every region of the world, from the stuffy Standard English of UN editors in New York to the pidgin of Papua New Guinea. It is therefore difficult to conceive of a mechanism that could uproot English – short of a cataclysmic event such as nuclear war or climate change.

To be sure, translation software has made some significant inroads; and, though it still sounds like science fiction, a machine will probably be perfected sometime in the future to bridge linguistic divides, producing fluent Gulf Arabic, say, when it hears someone speaking Japanese. But electronic translating aids will be no more remarkable than contact lenses or hearing aids are now, and there will always be a need for a common language.

Of course, anything can happen to a language given enough time. Think of what befell English a thousand years ago when William the Conqueror won the battle of Hastings. After a couple of centuries of mixing Anglo-Saxon and Norman French (with just enough Norse to remove the irksome declensions and conjugations of Indo-European syntax), English evolved into a tongue rich with nuance and with pairs of words for the same thing, such as null and void or kingly and regal.

As English continues to spread, new vernaculars will doubtless emerge, fragmenting perhaps, as Latin did, into a family of dialects and even into fully-fledged languages. There might not be US election in 3008 – a coalition of other countries might have conquered North America by then; or illiteracy might become the prevailing mode, with only a modest literate class such as in ancient Rome or Norman England. But English is far too entrenched in the human story to disappear; it will prevail, albeit as some strange dialect of current English.

Last Days of Empire

The year 1258 was a pivotal moment in time for the Islamic Caliphate: the golden era of the Abbasid leadership came to an abrupt end in February of that year with the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols. In a change as far-reaching in its implications as the fall of the Roman Empire, the economy and an entire model of government collapsed overnight, causing a geopolitical shift in which the balance of power altered irrevocably. The Muslim world never recaptured the glory that was the one Umma, with the eventual decline of Islamic eminence over many centuries.

Similarly, future historians may well look back at 2009 as the pivotal point of inflexion that marked the beginning of the end of the American era. Somewhat ironically in a modern economic context, the American century began in earnest with a financial bailout in the 1940s, namely, the Marshall Plan, which succeeded in reversing the socio-economic and political deterioration of Western Europe after World War II.

The current global financial crisis has already diminished the status of America as the world's only superpower. On the practical side, the US is already stretched militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq, and is now stretched financially with crippling debt and an industrial sector that seeks its own set of government handouts, in the wake of the hefty bailout for the financial institutions. On the philosophical level, it is harder for the US to argue in favour of its free market ideas when its own markets continue to collapse.

In some respects, America is already a weary Goliath having to dodge blows from an array of cunning and fast-rising Davids. As US economic and political power dips from the zenith, even the entrepreneurial and technological spirit that made America great is taking root in other regions of the world, most prominently China and India. The American demise is both inevitable and imminent. According to the investment bank Goldman Sachs, these Asian giants as well as other emerging economies are already challenging US dominance in every sphere.

It is highly symbolic, for instance, that, while the US Treasury is on its knees, Chinese astronauts are walking in space and the Indian Chandrayaan1 spacecraft is heading for the moon. Simply put, America no longer has the monopoly on big ideas. The next technological revolution – with the power to transform future society as a Google or a Microsoft – could just as easily come out of India's Bangalore or China's Zhongguancun as Silicon Valley.

In 2009, both the US and the rest of the world will be in a period of transition. Consequently, this presents a rare window of opportunity for developing countries, including those in the Gulf region, to slip through the barriers to enter the new global system in a position of strength. Specifically, the countries of the region must step up to the compelling troika of efficient capital markets, the rule of law and openness to new ideas.

The report by Goldman Sachs predicts that by 2050 only the US and Japan are likely to remain in the group of the world's seven richest nations, the G7. By reinventing and reinvigorating the Gulf Co-operation Council, the Gulf region as a collegiate bloc could overtake and replace some of the current members of the group.

This analysis is not wishful thinking, nor does it stem just from people who long for a multi-polar world. Even the latest report by the bastion of US intelligence, the National Intelligence Council, paints a bleak picture of the future of American influence and power. It predicts that the US dollar will lose its position as the global currency and that American clout will weaken as China and India grow more powerful.

We live in an age where everything has been speeded up. So we want answers now, especially when events, such as financial meltdowns and climate change, take on global proportions. But history resists acceleration. It yields its answers over decades and centuries, not years.

At the end of Islam's golden era, the Umma was partitioned among Mongols, Arabs and Turks – but Islam itself survived, of course. Today, America is past its apogee, but it will remain structurally strong for decades to come. Moreover, this does not diminish the ability of capitalism to generate wealth. As Henry Luce, founder of the Time publishing empire, wrote in 1941 when he first coined the American century: “It now becomes our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels.” These words will resonate when the conquerors do take over, for they will do so with cheaper and better goods and services, rather than with bows and arrows.
