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It's Asia's century and the West better adapt to that

Sholto Byrnes

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Schoolchildren in Boston, Massachusetts, found a different map of the world in their classrooms this week. In the Gall-Peters projection, Africa and South America look enormous. North America is shrunken, while Europe is reduced to an insignificant smudge at the top. The Global South dominates. It is a very different way of viewing the world. It also happens to be much more accurate. For while the continents are skewed – unavoidable when representing the spherical Earth in two dimensions – the land masses are depicted proportionately to their actual sizes.

So used are we to thinking of our geography in terms of the Mercator projection – the "normal" map we are all used to – Gall-Peters appears revolutionary.

It would be advisable for us to familiarise ourselves with it, however, for the Euro- and American-centric view that Mercator has promoted for centuries, is increasingly unreflective of geo-political reality, as well as of geography. And by the middle of the century, according to a new report by PricewaterhouseCoopers, it will be totally out of date.

In The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050, it really does begin to look like the Asian Century, with China predicted to have the world's largest GDP by purchasing power parity, India the second largest, Indonesia the fourth and Japan the eighth. Latin America is represented by Brazil and Mexico at fifth and seventh. The United States drops

to third place, the United Kingdom slips to 10th, and France doesn't make the top 10. The only other European countries that make that cut are Russia at sixth and Germany at ninth. It is a different world indeed – and one that looks much more like Gall-Peters than Mercator.

Overall average global growth is expected to be relatively low, at 2.6 per cent per annum until 2050. But the prospect is gloomier still for the G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the US and the UK) which are expected to average only 1.9 per cent, while their share of global GDP declines to 20 per cent. The E7 group of China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Russia, Mexico and Turkey, on the other hand, will make up 50 per cent of global GDP.

Taking the long view, historians may see this as a return to the previous norm. Civilisations were thriving in Asia, Central and Southern America and Africa when northern Europe was mired in ignorance, poverty, endless wars and invasions.

The "dark ages" – a very Eurocentric term referring to roughly the fifth to 10th centuries – were not dark at all at the court of the Abbasid caliphate, and even in the 16th century it would have been a strange choice to live in Tudor England rather than under the benign, tolerant and civilised rule of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great. Much as children in the West are generally given the impression that the ascent of the European powers (and then of America) was a natural progression, not least because western freedoms and values are supposed to possess an innate superiority over those of other (lesser) cultures, there was nothing inevitable about what might eventually be seen as a shortish window of European domination. Neither was there anything remotely civilised or altruistic about the way those empires were won.

The National's columnist Faisal Al Yafai made a powerful point by quoting from Shashi Tharoor's new book *Inglorious Empire* last week: "The British conquered one of the richest countries in the world and reduced it ... to one of the poorest, most diseased and most illiterate countries by 1947."

Likewise, I have been struck, while reading Amitav Ghosh's trilogy leading up to the *Opium Wars* of the 19th century, by the almost comical arrogance and hypocrisy of the British officials and traders who insisted that the Chinese must be "liberated" by force of arms, in order to enjoy the benefits of free trade – even when the commerce they wished to inflict involved a drug that was regarded as a scourge, and its use a source of shame, at home.

The savagery and condescension that went with empire are not so distant. They are most certainly within living memory. A group of elderly Kenyans won a case nearly four years ago against the British government for their barbaric treatment during the Mau-Mau rebellion in the 1950s.

One Malaysian acquaintance recalls his astonishment at a British teacher (later to achieve renown as the novelist Anthony Burgess) addressing pupils in what was then colonial Malaya as "gentlemen".

"We thought the British wouldn't want to mix with us." Mostly he would have been right. "But here was this orang puteh [white man] who was able to relate to us."

More recently, when I went to see a former Conservative minister in the Houses of Parliament in the mid-1990s, he proceeded to phone another Tory grandee to say: "I've got this young journalist called Sholto Byrnes with me. He's a 'white man'."

Such terms, even spoken ironically, have no place today, and still less in the world of 2050. If many now-independent countries once needed to undergo what Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamed called a "decolonisation of the mind", the opposite may be the case with the western nations set to slide down the GDP rankings.

They need to learn the cultures, the languages and the self-chosen narratives of the emerging hegemon in the south and the east. They could start with having a good look at the Gall-Peters projection.

Once the shock has worn off, it may powerfully focus the mind on a reality they will soon have to confront.