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The need to train young leaders

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The other day we attended an international conference in the small and picturesque Swiss city of Stein am Rhein. The symposium with the name "stars" brings together young leaders in the age of 35 to 45 from all around the world, and from the most diverse fields of business, science, culture and nongovernmental organisations. All participants have been nominated by their CEOs and qualify through their leadership potential. During four days, the attendants are introduced into a wide variety of contemporary challenges, from biochemistry to energy supply, from the global economy to the euro crisis. Top experts in each of these fields provide insights into their rich experience.

It is by now evident that the world has entered a new age, the Asian century. The centres of gravity in the world economy and in geopolitics are rapidly shifting from the industrialised west to Asia, particularly to China, India and Southeast Asia. Under these circumstances, it is essential that future leaders in business, politics and society get an insight into the value systems and aspirations of people, who do not belong to their own country or to their own culture. A particularly important issue is the mutual understanding of the west and Asia. Of course, almost all important companies in the US or in Europe have branches today, sales offices, production units and even research and development centres in Asia. Most businesses today, cannot survive without the link to Asia and markets in the industrialised west remain very important for Asia, even if the euro crisis has dampened expectations considerably. All this, however, does not imply that companies have really changed their worldview. Eurocentrism still shapes the attitude of all too many westerners. They are stuck in the time of the Cold War, when Europe was the centre of world politics, and they see the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the "iron curtain" as the crucial events in recent world history.

Of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union was of tremendous importance for the world. With the disappearance of the East-West conflict, a new age in global politics had begun. Some even thought that the end of history had arrived. The Cold War had been a difficult time, but it was a historic period, when the antagonisms were played out within a European setting. After all the main civilisation and cultural inputs into the US came from Europe and the Soviet Union was, like today's Russian Federation, essentially a European country. Also, the two ideologies facing each other, communism and liberalism, are both creations of the western world. All this has been changing with the beginning of the Asian age. Now, the west faces a totally different world. If this encounter is to be successful, mutual respect for each other's values is necessary. The thought that Europe is the cradle of civilisation, the centre of the world, has to be abandoned once and for all.

The most stimulating debates in international gatherings are found where Asian and western minds meet. Of course, there is a lot of comparing between China and India, while Japan is all too often left on the sidelines. There is new interest in Southeast Asia and particularly, in Indonesia and, most recently, in Burma/Myanmar. Both in Asia and in the west, we are currently witnessing a generational change. The younger generations that are moving into positions of responsibility and leadership have new expectations and new ambitions, when it comes to the interaction between Asia and the west. Very often, they already have extensive

experience of living and working in the west and in Asia, respectively. While in the past, the traffic had been very lopsided towards the west, now we witness a distinct trend towards Asia, notably towards India and China. We know of European companies that have been shifting, not only research and development centres, but even their training facilities to Asia. All this provides innumerable new opportunities. Corporate leaders in the west have discovered that to be successful in Asian markets, their companies cannot limit themselves to have production facilities and distribution networks in Asia. They also need to shift their research and development, in order to optimise their products and services for the specific requirements of these markets. On the other hand, Asian companies are expanding their presence in the west. Earlier, it had been the Japanese who went on buying sprees to Europe and the US. Now it's the turn of the Chinese and of the Indians. Young leaders in the west and in Asia today, have the opportunity to put the exchange between their cultures on a new footing. In the past, there were colonial legacies that distorted the public sentiment toward the west, particularly in India and in China. Today, the interaction is one of equals. This makes relations at the same time easier and more difficult. It is up to the new generation of leaders in business, society and politics to make sure that the beginning of the Asian age is also the beginning of an era of peace and prosperity. (The writer is the Far East correspondent of Swiss daily Neue Zürcher Zeitung)

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