It is quite clear that the role of strategic leadership has been essential to the success of human civilisations throughout the course of history. Those leaders who failed to understand this fundamental reality led their societies into crisis until, eventually, they were driven out by more perceptive men. In the past there have always been alternative strategic leaders ready to lead their societies out of crisis by facilitating the objectives of their dynamic strategists.

What is so different about the present? The problem for contemporary society is that there are no alternative sources of strategic leadership to call upon in the current real global crisis. While it is possible to change political parties in today’s advanced democracies, it is very difficult to change national policies. Our economic experts even argue that strategic leadership – although they do not recognise or understand the concept – is not only unnecessary but also positively dangerous. They preach the omnipotence of individual decision making – an omnipotence that requires no overall direction or support. Governments, they claim, exist only to enforce the rules that these individuals adopt in their business activities. This so-called ‘methodological individualism’ must be imposed, we are told, on rich and poor countries alike.

It is interesting that strategic leadership is still to be found in some Third World countries that have already set out on the development process – what I call, in Global Transition (1999), the emerging strategic countries (ESCs). Political leaders in ESCs, like those during the earlier stages of the development of the West, still understand that their best interests will be served by facilitating the objectives of their
strategists, who constitute a relatively small ruling elite. Tragically, leaders in the developing world are being forced to relinquish this role during the present ‘Asian crisis’ by those international agents of neoliberalism the IMF and the World Bank, which are determined to impose totally inappropriate ‘structural adjustment’ policies and advanced democratic political structures on these struggling societies. As soon as they are able, Asian leaders will reject neoliberal economic and political policies and return to developing their societies along lines similar to those taken by the West at the same stage in the transition process. But until then the West will merely prolong the difficulties that Third World countries are currently experiencing.

A fatal forgetfulness

When did the leaders of Western civilisations forget the essential role of strategic leadership? A study of contemporary history suggests that it was a very recent event. This is reflected in the type of policies pursued by the major rich countries and in their recent economic performance.

Only since the early 1980s – from the early days of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations – have Western governments abandoned their strategic-leadership role. At that time it became fashionable to believe that the best of all worlds could be achieved simply by dismantling the organisations of strategic leadership and selling off the associated infrastructure with indecent haste and at bargain prices to private interests. This is so familiar to us all that it does not require documentation. Only over the past few decades has it been fashionable to assume that the strategists can lead themselves. This is a curious fashion because, as we have seen, it flies in the face of human experience over the past two million years. There is a potentially tragic irony here. The Western world, after being locked in a mortal struggle with the communist world for much of the twentieth century, finally defeated those antistrategic forces only to see them reemerge in more subtle form among their own ranks as neoliberal policies.

What accounts for the fatal forgetfulness? While there are a number of reasons, some of which were touched upon earlier, they are