

How the West will cope with the 'Asian Century'

THOMAS S. WILKINS

Kishore Mahubani, Singaporean Professor, former UN Ambassador and public intellectual describes a world fundamentally transformed since the end of the Cold War. In it, Asia and Asians are re-claiming the prominent role they played before the surge of Western industrial and imperial power over the last two centuries. This is a world in which Asian countries are no longer the 'objects' of international relations to be acted upon by the Western powers, but 'actors' in their own right. Mahubani contends that the rise of Asia is 'unstoppable'. By 2050 three of the four world's largest economies will be Asian: China, India, and Japan, alongside the United States. We are therefore facing a seismic shift in the redistribution of power from the West to the East. This, Mahubani is careful to point out, does not mean that the West will not remain a major global force, but it will lose the predominance of economic, political, and institutional power it has enjoyed to date. He argues that this should be a positive development overall, but everything will depend on how the West responds to its relative loss of global hegemony.

Three scenarios

To this purpose the book's first chapter outlines three scenarios, in order of their likelihood, of how the West may react to the rise of Asia. Scenario one: the 'march to modernity' identifies how Asia is developing in loose correspondence with the technological and libertarian model engrained in the Western enlightenment project. Many Asian states seek to replicate the 'best practice' of the West to achieve their modernisation goals, albeit in accord with their own social and cultural norms. Gracious acceptance of this fact by the West ushers in the prospect of 'absolute gains' for all. The second scenario is one in which the Western powers feel overtly threatened by rising Asian power and 'retreat into fortresses'. In this case political and economic protectionism by the West might be perceived as a way of preserving their relative position, but this will forfeit the absolute gains possible through openness and cooperation with Asia. This, Mahubani argues, is already underway to some extent in the US and EU. The third scenario - 'the triumph of the West' - entails a reassertion of the hubris exemplified in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992) where Westerners believe the only acceptable model for development is replication of their own socio-political model. A key flaw in this triumphalist thesis is that it does not work. Even in Europe the cherished notion that democracies prevent war was disproved in the Balkan conflicts. Attempts to actively export democracy at the barrel of a gun, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, have not met with success. Indeed, these Western conceits can be downright harmful to the supposed beneficiary (or 'target') societies.

Having set the context for debate in Western terms, the author examines more closely 'why Asia is rising now' (Chapter 2). He recognises seven mutually reinforcing 'pillars' of Western wisdom behind the miraculous advance of Asia: 'free market economics', 'science and technology', 'meritocracy', 'pragmatism' a 'culture of peace', 'rule of law' and 'education'. Adherence to these seven pillars allows Asia to reproduce the success experienced by Western states in their own ascent to power. Mahubani considers this a cause for pride and celebration on the part of the West.

The loss of Western credibility

Chapters 3-5 return to the challenges faced by Western powers in adapting to this power shift. In 'why is the West not celebrating' (Chapter 3) Mahubani identifies the tension between what he calls the 'philosophical West' (or Western values) and the 'material West' (interests). He poses the question: 'The rise of Asia creates a real dilemma for Western states: should they be guided by their material interests and cling on to power, or should they be guided by their values and begin to cede and share power?' (p. 103). He observes that the 12% of the population that live in the West control the primary instruments of world order such as the IMF and World Bank, G-7 and the UN Permanent Security Council (UNSC), underwriting this control with overwhelming military force. Here the author also lays bare the hypocrisy and abuse of power by the US, in particular. Washington eschewed participation in the International Criminal Court (ICC) rightly discerning that this would expose American military personnel to prosecution. The selective exhortation of democracy and human rights, coupled with the commission of human rights violations and torture in an 'illegal' (non-UN sanctioned) war in Iraq has demolished the international credibility of the US and any moral pretence it had to world leadership. Undermined by these legitimacy deficits and political miscalculations the

claim to world leadership by the West is becoming unsustainable. In Chapter 4: 'de-Westernization and the return of history' the author buttresses his case for the relinquishment of the instruments of world order by the West. In some aspects this is an elaboration of the philosophical stance he propounded in his work *Can Asians Think: Understanding the Divide between East and West*. (2008) Once, Asians may have believed in the innate superiority of Western civilisation. Now "The rest of the world has moved on...The mindsets of the largest populations within Asia - the Chinese, the Muslims, and the Indians - have been changed irrevocably" (pp. 130-131). The author points out that Western absolutes such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' are interpreted and applied differently in Asia, nuances neither recognised nor understood by Western observers. They also fail to apprehend the limits to their own freedoms such as widespread political imperatives toward self-censorship. In this chapter the author discourses at length on the Islamic world in which US actions have had catastrophic resonance among its populace.

In Chapter 5 - 'Western incompetence, Asian competence?' - the author

(uneven in themselves) are showcased to underline the strengths of Asia, while the deplorable conditions and prospects of Burma, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, are skimmed over. Furthermore, 'Asia' as conceived by Mahubani seems to incorporate what most observers would separately distinguish as the 'Middle East'. This serves to undermine Mahubani's case against the West since the most egregious examples of hubris and ineptitude are drawn from US misbehaviour in this region, not 'Asia' proper. To exclude Middle Eastern countries from 'Asia' would have deprived the author of some of his anti-Western ammunition.

Second, this reader was dismayed that the author fails to highlight the growing fissure in the West itself between the US and EU. It is Washington, not Brussels (harmful protectionist practices notwithstanding) to which the majority of the most ignoble foreign policy adventures may be ascribed. Yes, in some respects the EU and the US collaborate against joint dangers, but it is obvious to any European that they and Americans do not think alike and are implacably opposed on many issues, especially

*The rise of the West transformed the world.
The rise of Asia will bring about an equally significant
transformation' (p. 1)*

*'Today, the 5.6 billion people who live outside
the Western universe will no longer
accept decisions made on their behalf in
Western capitals.' (p. 5)*

shatters the assumption held by many Westerners that the rest of the world is the incubator of most of the global problems and the West itself is the solution. Quite the reverse Mahubani argues - the West plays a major part in many global problems (p. 175). The damage done to international law by the US-UK invasion of Iraq is condemned as 'a seismic error, one of the greatest acts of folly of our age' (p. 177). It raises the question of how violators of the UN's principles can also be the enforcers of them? He goes on to provide a litany of American policy blunders from short-sighted domestic populism, flouting of world opinion on global warming, selective application of free trade principles, to ideologically driven and impractical diplomacy (e.g. Iran, North Korea). In contrast, the book argues that Asian countries are much more adept in their management of international problems. He cites Beijing's responsible approach to the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-8 and its great acumen in winning allies throughout Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. In Mahubani's view Asia is outperforming the West in the skilful conduct of its diplomacy and statecraft.

Achieving a just and workable world order

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with a roadmap of putative solutions to many of the impasses identified in the previous chapters. Mahubani argues that the time to restructure the world order has come. A just and workable world order can only be achieved if the West shares some of the instruments of world governance with the great powers of Asia. In return the Asian newcomers can shoulder some of the heavy burdens that sustaining world order entails. Reform of the UNSC is critical. He states that 'the UNSC should preferably reflect the great powers of 2045, not of 1945' (p. 249). Furthermore, Asian personnel should become candidates for the IMF and World Bank, positions that have invariably been occupied by Americans and Europeans, respectively. Mahubani recognises the difficulties but argues that the West must have the courage (and good grace) to make such concessions.

The New Asian Hemisphere makes some powerful and provocative arguments and is one of several recent books - Fareed Zakaria's *The Post American World* (2008) being a close complement - that captures the 'Asia rising' *Zeitgeist*. There are some evident weaknesses in the overall thesis however:

Mahubani largely avoids confronting the diversity and discrepant progress of 'Asia' in this book. The accomplishments of China and India

human rights and international law. Europe and the US should not be conflated: we are not 'All Americans Now'.¹

The author is also selective in his use of historical and contemporary evidence to illustrate the positive facets of Asian development. This reader takes particular issue with the author's admiration of Japanese 'competence' in its occupation of Singapore 1942-45, one of the key examples cited being their efficient management of the botanical gardens! (pp. 180-81). This of course occurred in the context of a brutal conquest of Asia in which the Japanese exhibited extreme incompetence both in their conduct of the war and the operation of their 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'. The occupation of Singapore, like Hong Kong, Shanghai and others was a hopelessly inefficient and wretched enterprise. The author's selective extraction of examples from the historical record cannot be taken at face value.

By any measure this is an incisive and important book. It confronts perhaps the most significant international question of this century: how will Asia develop and how the West will respond? The author asserts that 'the primary purpose of this book is to explain the world as it is seen through non-Western eyes, so that the 900 million who live in the West appreciate how the remaining 5.6 billion people view the world.' (p. 8). In this respect it is a conspicuous success. In contributing to this lively public and academic debate on the future of East-West relations Mahubani does not pull his punches. As an interested Asian observer of the US, this book is intended as much as a wake-up call to the West as a statement of Asian confidence in their future. While the book may well upset or anger many Western readers Mahubani has rendered them the valuable, if unwelcome, service of shaking them out of their complacency and provoking necessary self-reflection.

Dr Thomas S. Wilkins

Affiliated Fellow, IIAS (Amsterdam)
Tomswilkins@yahoo.com

References

- 1 See Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, (New York: Vintage, 2004).