

South China Morning Post 南華早報

Can Asia step up to remake global order?

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Nathan Gardels

Nathan Gardels considers a call for global leadership to strengthen outdated world institutions

The rise of Asia is the single most important historical event of our era. Yet, for all the continent's now well-established might, few voices in the region have stepped forward to address what role Asia, above all China, must play in shaping Globalisation 2.0 - the interdependence of identities that characterises our world.

In his new book, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World*, Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore, at last rises to the challenge.

Mahbubani's magnum opus is so far the most comprehensive and objective proposal to update the world institutions - the UN, the Bretton Woods organisations like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the World Trade Organisation - by accommodating them to the rise of the rest. Indeed, he evinces more faith in those institutions than their Western founders.

With characteristic Asian pragmatism, Mahbubani's essential argument is not for the creation of new institutions that enshrine the global power shift, but rather closing the "democratic deficit" by filling up the old bottle of the West's rule-based system with the new wine of the rising rest. For Mahbubani, the old institutions should remain, but under new management.

By Mahbubani's lights, the greatest paradox of the present historical moment is that the "common norms" that have made Asia successful have been adapted from the West. In this, the long-time apostle of non-Western modernity arrives at the mirror-image conclusions of historian Niall Ferguson, the long-time champion of the virtues of Western imperialism. Mahbubani's "common norms" more or less overlap with Ferguson's "killer apps" of modernisation.

The common norms for Mahbubani are modern science and logical reasoning, free-market economics, a social contract that accountably binds ruler and ruled, and multilateralism. Ferguson's six killer apps are: competition, science, property rights, modern medicine, consumer society and the work ethic.

Both avoid the loaded term "democracy" as a norm or an application. For Ferguson, "competition" would seem to encompass not only multiparty contests, but also meritocratic performance competition within one party, as in China. For Mahbubani, the West was the first to leap ahead by destroying feudalism, but democracy is not yet universally shared. In China, he nonetheless sees a kind of systemic accountability of the party to the masses since it must "earn its legitimacy daily" through performance.

Mahbubani is not naive. He exhaustively inventories the geopolitical stumbling blocks that can throw a wrench into his optimism (e.g. China vs India, sea lanes between Japan and China). But at the same time, his trust in the allegiance to a rules-based system in the West from whence it emanated seems grounded in a time warp.

Indeed, the greatest stumbling block from my point of view is how the democratisation of global institutions he proposes will be frustrated by the democratic publics of the West.

First, these publics are turning ever more inward to protect themselves from the withering gales of competition that the post-second-world-war system has unleashed.

Second, and most importantly, the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system were put in place after the second world war when the democratic American public still trusted its elites enough to agree to delegate power to institutions that would benefit all. That trust has gone.

Finally, as Mahbubani readily acknowledges, the Pax Americana period of a rules-based international system that provided global public goods also served US interests.

Even if this old system ought to be maintained, it cannot happen without the full engagement of China and the US. No reorganisation of the UN, the IMF or WTO will matter if these two powers don't buy in. Given the weakness of elites in the US, this suggests that China needs to drive any new embrace of the global rules-based system in a way that provides common public goods for all.

Clearly, China's leaders need to get ready for prime time.

The danger is that this moment could be a repeat of 1914 - when a system of shaky alliances with waning and waxing powers jockeying for advantage was tripped into world war by a small event. The hope, which Mahbubani sketches out in his vision, is that the period ahead can be like the early 1950s when enduring institutions that kept the peace and promoted prosperity for all were constructed.

A world adrift desperately needs global thinkers, most of all from Asia. Mahbubani fits the bill with this signal work at this critical time. The kind of robust institutions he calls for are all that will stand between us and 1914 all over again. Let's pray his optimism is justified.

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Source URL (retrieved on *Jan 21st 2013, 8:35pm*): <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1121373/can-asia-step-remake-global-order>