

Review

**TABLE TALK WITH KISHORE MAHBUBANI; Era of Western domination 'is ending'**

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AT A gathering of thought leaders two years ago in Davos, Switzerland, someone tapped Professor Kishore Mahbubani on the shoulder. As Prof Mahbubani, 63, recalls: 'It was Mr Jan Peter Balkenende, who was then prime minister of the Netherlands, and he said, 'Aren't you Kishore Mahbubani?'

'I said, 'Yes, how do you know me?' and he said, 'My mother asked me to read your book.'

That book is *The New Asian Hemisphere*, Prof Mahbubani's third. Published in 2008, it is about the resurgence of Asia and also a caution to a complacent West to rev up its competitiveness.

This week, *Foreign Policy* (FP) magazine named this veteran diplomat one of the world's 100 top thinkers, alongside investing oracle Warren Buffett, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and United States President Barack Obama. This is the third time Prof Mahbubani, a married father of three, has been listed thus. The first was in 2005, when he was named one of FP's top 100 public intellectuals; the second was last year when he was ranked 92nd. He is in the same position this year.

After 33 years in diplomacy - including as ambassador to the United Nations, with a stint as president of the UN Security Council - he is now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, and professor in the practice of public policy.

I sat down with him last week to learn more from him about the US' renewed interest in Asia, among other concerns:

What do you make of China-US ties today?

In the last year or so, China has been trying to rise quietly without waking up the sleeping tiger that is the United States. But the tiger has been woken up. For a long time, the US viewed China's rise with a certain degree of equanimity. But it has suddenly become - I won't say alarmed - but concerned about that rise. When Mr Bill Clinton was president of the US, he was very laidback about China, and his successor George W. Bush was actually very good for China because he had the US fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and gave China a geopolitical window of opportunity to focus on its development. We are finally seeing the entire Washington establishment focused on China in a way it never was.

Which is ironic given how insular China's focus is, rarely on geopolitical concerns that aren't in its economic interest?

I would not say it has been necessarily insular. In fact, the Chinese have been quite proactive; for example, it shocked the world in 2001 by proposing the Asean-China free trade agreement (FTA), which was a bolt out of the blue for the Japanese. But China has deliberately continued to follow its former leader Deng

Xiaoping's policy of keeping a low profile - except in 2009 and last year when it made lots of mistakes,

including with the visit of US President Barack Obama to Beijing, and declining to condemn North Korea's shelling of a South Korean island. These mistakes alarmed many, but China has since been working very hard to calm waters again - and has, so far, done so successfully.

Its continued claims in the South China Sea can't be calming.

Yes. China needs to spell out its position on this sea more clearly, especially as to how it is consistent with, say, the principles of the UN Law of the Sea Convention. It has to put up a case on the sea that is defensible under international law and they should learn from countries such as Malaysia and Singapore that have referred their disputes to the International Court of Justice, which is a valuable mechanism for resolving maritime disputes.

What do you make of Chinese thinker Yang Xuetong's suggestion that China has to have moral authority to defeat the US?

I like it. As he wrote in the International Herald Tribune on Nov 21: 'It is the battle for people's hearts and minds that will determine who eventually prevails. And, as China's ancient philosophers predicted, the country that displays more humane authority will win.' This is the kind of competition we want to see in Asia. In theory, the US has more soft power than China but, at the same time, China has increased its trade in the region much faster than the US has in recent times. The biggest challenge for the US in Asia is that its deeds have to match its words. So it has to deliver on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP - a regional trade agreement currently being negotiated between the US and eight other Asia-Pacific countries, including Singapore). And if the US Congress does not support the TPP, the US will go nowhere in Asia.

The Chinese are going to try very hard to demonstrate to the rest of the world that its rise is good for the world. I actually believe that, because China alone has rescued 600 million people from absolute poverty; no other country in human history has ever done so. And China is also really investing in green technology, so there are many positive things that China is doing that often go unrecognised.

But who wants to be pro-Chinese?

You do not have to be. In fact, we are going to move away from a world where we try to be more Chinese or more American and move into a world where we are more of ourselves.

Is that why you are now writing a book on global governance?

I am trying to persuade countries, especially the big powers, that their national interest is aligned with greater global governance. In the past, the world's 193 countries were in separate boats; you just needed rules to make sure that these boats did not collide. Now, we all live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat and would want a captain and crew taking care of all on the boat; that is global governance.

The challenge is to persuade the great global powers that we need greater global governance and stronger multilateral institutions, which they think constrain their powers. It can be done if you appeal to their national interests.

Why are the great powers slow to embrace such long-term benefits?

Quite often, governments know what is the right thing to do. The Singapore Government's big strength is that it knows what is right and has the capacity to make long-term decisions, compared to, say, France and Italy, which do not have such capacity because it is sometimes politically impossible to do the sensible thing in many developed countries.

Why so?

If you look at the problems that are happening in the world today, from continuing unemployment in the US to the struggles of Greece, Italy and now Spain to regain growth, the reason why they are struggling so is they have not educated their populations that, with the return of Asia, they now have to retool their societies and become competitive again. The great myth and illusion that American and European politicians have engendered in their populations is, 'Don't worry, things will bounce back naturally.' That is not true.

So what is the true picture?

I am working on three sets of big ideas about that. First, we have reached the end of the era of Western domination of world history. Related to the first idea is the second one, which is the return of Asia.

Which means the return of an economic miracle?

It is not a miracle at all; in fact, it is a completely normal thing to have happened. From the year AD1 to the year AD1820, the two largest economies in the world were always China and India. It was only in the last 200 years that Europe and North America have taken off. These last 200 years, against the backdrop of the last 2,000 years, have been a major historical aberration and if you have such an aberration, clearly it has to end.

What is your third big idea then?

That in our new, smaller and interdependent world, we need greater global governance. The world's big states have progressively weakened multilateral institutions because those constrain their powers, whereas multilateralism increases the influence of a small state. But my argument is that it is now in, say, the US' interest to strengthen multilateralism because the US is also becoming interdependent on the rest of the world. We are all now interconnected so we have to work together to solve problems.

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Professor Kishore Mahbubani was ranked on Foreign Policy magazine's list of the world's top 100 thinkers this week. He believes the era of Asian domination is returning and that greater global governance is needed in a more interdependent world. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

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