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The Seesaw of Power

By SERGE SCHMEMANN

The 20th century ended with the United States as the unchallenged superpower in the world. In the 21st, while America's military might has remained dominant, the "soft" powers of wealth and information have distinctly shifted — the former increasingly to the East, and specifically to China, the latter to a new, transnational cyberrealm of instant information and communication.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., Dambisa Moyo and Kishore Mahbubani have dedicated much of their professional lives to following these changes. Nye, professor and former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, coined the term "soft power" in 1990 and has continued to explore the subject since, most recently in *The Future of Power*. Moyo, an economist born and raised in Zambia, shocked the developed world in 2009 with her book *Dead Aid*, an indictment of traditional aid to Africa as misguided and harmful. Now she takes on the West with *How the West Was Lost: Fifty Years of Economic Folly – And the Stark Choices Ahead*. Mahbubani, a former Singapore diplomat and now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, has written prolifically about what he sees as the return of Asia to its natural place at the "center stage" of world history.

They met in London for a conversation moderated by Serge Schmemann, editor of this magazine.

Serge Schmemann: You all seem to agree in broad terms that a massive shift of power is underway in the world, and that the United States may not remain the dominant actor. Dr. Moyo, what does this mean for the world?

Dambisa Moyo: If you ask, is it better for the world, for other countries, other regions, to play more of a part in terms of global politics, economics and social issues, I think the short answer is yes. For many decades, certainly throughout my lifetime, everyone went to the United States and to Europe to finance aid programs, to provide guidance on how economic policy or social policy should be crafted. It mostly worked, but there are many places in the world — my own continent, Africa, as an example — where it has not worked so effectively.

Demographic projections are that there'll be nine billion of us on the planet in the next 30, we're ill-prepared for that. China, and many other pockets of the world, are demanding more of energy products and other things. We're not prepared for this, and unless we want to cede something will have to give. Westerners will have to sacrifice something.



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Schmemmann : Professor Mahbubani, you seem to welcome a leveling between East and West. Is that what's happening?

Kishore Mahbubani : I would say America will continue to do well — the world wants America to do well — but the kind of incredible domination of the world that America and the West enjoyed for the last 200 years was a hugely artificial moment of history. For 1,800 of the last 2,000 years, the two largest economies in the world were consistently China and India. So by 2050, or earlier, the No. 1 economy will be China, No. 2 India, No. 3 the United States of America — that's the normal scheme of things.

This by and large is a great thing because, one, billions of people are being rescued from absolute poverty; two, you're going to see a return, in a sense, to normality. When you underperform vis-à-vis the rest of the world, as China or India have, you lose your self-confidence, you lose your sense of well-being; that's how 100,000 Englishmen could rule over 300 million Indians so effortlessly. An Asian cultural renaissance will be the biggest thing that's going to happen in the 21st century, and I think it's going to be a very exciting new world. It should be better for all of us.

Joseph Nye : There are two great power shifts going on in this century that I describe in my book. One is West to East, on which I agree with Kishore. Before the industrial revolution, Asia was more than half the world's population and more than half the world's product, and by the middle of the 21st century Asia will return to what you might call normal proportions.

But the second shift is quite different, and I don't think we've wrapped our minds around it enough, and that is the shift away from governments, East or West, to nongovernmental actors, which is powered by the information revolution. When I think about the distribution of power in the world, I think of a three-dimensional chess board. The top board is military power: I think the Americans are the only global superpower, and I think it'll stay that way for a couple of decades. If you go to the second board, of economic power among states, the world is multipolar. If you go to the bottom board — transnational relations, things outside the control of governments — power is chaotically distributed, and this is where the diffusion of power comes in. You have flows of financial reserves and resources that are larger than the budgets of most countries. You have not only terrorists, but you have cyberterrorists who stay at home and send electrons across borders, and you don't have any idea where they came from. You have [climate change](#). You have pandemics.

In these areas, it's not a question of East vs. West. Unless East and West — and South — cooperate, you can't deal with these issues. You have to use soft and hard power to create networks and institutions, and if you ask what country is best placed to create them, I think it'll remain the United States. So I think the Americans will remain the most powerful, but it'll be a different sort of power.

Moyo : I think the jury's still out, if I may use the cliché, in the sense that it's not so clear any more that the broader international community values the institutions that the United States can offer in the way that they did perhaps a few decades ago. It's not obvious that institutions like the World Bank and the I.M.F. have

the gravitas that they had, and it's not obvious to me that countries around the world are still aspiring to be more like America in the way that they did when I was growing up in Zambia.

I think the West missed a trick, because it adopted — certainly in Africa and many of the poor emerging economies — an attitude of “do what we say and not what we do.” The whole idea of incentives, which has been the backbone of the success in Western economies, is not something the West transplanted into places like Africa. The approach to economic development in Africa has been focused on aid; it's been focused on what someone called “learned helplessness.”

That's left quite a bitter taste. Economically, many countries — not just in Africa, but Brazil, Chile — now turn to China. China gives them a real opportunity to sell agricultural products that have been locked out of the West through subsidy programs. It's an opportunity for Africa to trade, which is a key piece of the puzzle for economic development. A continent of one billion has been less than 2 percent of global trade.

The Western press will say, “Oh my God, China's raiding Africa. It's colonialization. Africans are being abused.” But it's much more nuanced than that. People don't believe that America is interested in Africa's welfare beyond perhaps a few charity concerts and sending a few bits of aid money. People don't really believe that America is interested in job creation in Africa and creating long-term sustainable economic growth.

Mahbubani : Let me put across a very different point of view from what Joe said about the United States. Again, I always emphasize that America has done more good than harm to the world. But at the same time it's important to recognize that American soft power is the fastest deflating bubble that we have seen in the world today. It was part of the artificial moment of history of Western domination of the world, but that soft power is dissipating rapidly.

If you look in terms of what America has stood for on human rights, you've gone from the Soviet Union producing the Gulag of the day to America producing the Guantánamo of the day. You've seen America remain silent on the horrible things happening in Gaza. When Vice President Gore tells everyone, “Be careful of CO2 emissions,” he can educate the world, but cannot educate his own population.

When the dust settles, and when China is the No. 1 economy and India is the No. 2 economy, they're not going to just sit back and passively accept every rule that America has written for the world. The rest of the world, paradoxically, is more ready than Americans for a globalization that Americans themselves are creating.

Nye: While Kishore and I are good friends, I happen to disagree with him. We agree on some trends, but I think he greatly exaggerates about American soft power being in decline. The facts show quite the opposite. Look at the recent BBC poll on the attractiveness of different countries, and you will find that the United States is ranked well ahead of China. Hu Jintao told the 17th Party Congress in China in 2007 that China needed to invest more in its soft power, and they've invested billions in Confucius Institutes and in creating a

“Chinese Al Jazeera” and so forth. But the problem for China is that much of a country’s soft power comes from its civil society, not from its government, and China can’t unleash its civil society.

Why is it that India’s Bollywood sells so many films overseas and China doesn’t? It’s not because Indian actors and directors are better; it’s because China has censors. China has a magnificent Expo at Shanghai, which I went to and loved, and then it goes and locks up Liu Xiaobo, and it undercuts its own soft power. If you look at the polls done by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs or the BBC poll I mentioned, Chinese soft power has not increased and U.S. soft power has. So I just think the facts are not consistent with Kishore’s grand sort of sweeping generalizations.

One point where we do agree is that Americans have to adapt their attitudes on climate change. But ice caps don’t melt just because of what happened 100 years ago. They melt because of what’s put into the atmosphere now, and here China has passed the U.S. We — meaning China, the U.S., India, others — have got to reduce the carbon intensity of our growth, and that’s an area where we can work cooperatively, not competitively. Let me tell you: If the Himalayan glacier system melts and Chinese rivers stop flowing, this is going to be extraordinarily damaging, both for China and India, regardless of what the U.S. does.

Mahbubani : I’ve lived in Asia all my life. The thing I find paradoxical is that if you ask most people where they want to send their children to study — like my children — they all send them to the great America. If you go to China, for example, you meet mayors and others and they have degrees from American universities. But the paradox about all this also is that if you travel around the world, the people who are the most critical of American policies and American double standards are actually American-educated Asians or American-educated Africans...

Moyo : ...Can I just say, I love America. Don’t get me wrong.

Mahbubani : ...I love America too, but it’s the policies of America. The paradox is that Americans have lost the capacity to listen and to understand these massive changes that are going on. They assume that America can continue to lecture China. America will say, “Please be a responsible stakeholder in the world,” on the presumption that America is a responsible stakeholder in the world. But the rest of the world can see what America actually does to help the rest of the world, and what China does to help or harm the rest of the world.

As for democracy, I actually believe that in the long run China has to become democratic. There’s no other choice. If you’re going to create the largest middle class in the world, and you keep running them with the Chinese Communist Party, it’s not going to work. The question is not the destination, the question is the timing. The key point to remember is that from the point of view of the Chinese, there has been an explosion of personal freedom in China. Only 30 years ago Chinese could not travel overseas. Today, 40 million Chinese travel overseas each year, and 40 million Chinese return freely to China each year.

Nye : I actually agree with Kishore that, over time, China will change, and I think he’s also correct that it’ll

take quite some time. J. Stapleton Roy, former American ambassador to China, once said, “There are more Chinese free today than any time in Chinese history, but China’s not free.” The country that locks up Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei is not free. The question is how will China change over time. As China changes it’ll be better able to use its civil society and better able to develop its soft power. So let’s hope it happens.

Let me add, I applaud what China has done economically. To raise 400 million people out of poverty is an enormous accomplishment. But let’s remember that China faces some problems. One is going to be demographic. The one-child-per family policy is leading to an inverted demographic pyramid starting in 2015, in terms of new entrants to the labor force. As the Chinese say, they may grow old before they grow rich. They’re also going to have to face that as countries reach higher per capita G.D.P., growth rates tend to slow down. They’re no longer picking the low-hanging fruit. And China hasn’t solved the political participation problem yet, so there may be bumps in the road.

Let me go back to China’s external behavior for a minute and pick up something Dambisa said, which I think is important. We should welcome China’s purchase of commodities in Africa. If that raises incomes in Africa, that’s all to the good. It’s a different type of Chinese behavior that we worry about in Africa: It’s when a World Bank official or an E.U. official goes in and says, “No, I won’t build you a sports stadium, because it’s more important that you do something using this money related to poverty reduction,” and the African country says, “No, thank you. The Chinese have offered me both a sports stadium and a Swiss bank account for the president.” That has a terrible effect of undercutting the development of effective institutions, which is what Africa really needs. I worry about China’s behavior regarding corruption — not that it’s gobbling up commodities.

Moyo : Can I just jump in, if you wouldn’t mind? I’m going to give an example of a poll that I was quite surprised by — the 2007 Pew survey. They went to about 15 countries, if I remember correctly, in Africa, and they asked Africans, “What do you think of the Chinese? Are they better or worse than the Americans? Do you like them? Do you think they’re doing a good job?” And consistently, by wide margins — I’m talking 85-90 percent, 95 percent, Africans across the continent said, “We love the Chinese. They’re doing a good job. They’re not perfect. They’re better than the Americans. They are delivering an agenda that they have set.”

I agree with you that nobody should support a program where institutions are undermined, where it’s laced with corruption. However, I really do not believe that we should rely on traditional aid agencies and development agencies to be the ones who are delivering goods or providing services in these economies, and I think that has been a problem that has kept Africa back from economic development.

The problem with the American/Western model is that it has allowed African governments to abdicate their responsibilities. It’s essential to get our heads around the corruption, but ultimately it’s the responsibility of African governments to make sure that labor laws are observed, environmental concerns are dealt with, and that we don’t end up in a corrupt environment.

We are not going to fight corruption in Africa unless we have a middle class in Africa able to hold African governments accountable. So it's sort of chicken-and-egg. What the Chinese offer is not necessarily ideal, but it's certainly a better prospect in terms of job creation than what traditional development agencies offer.

I understand why people get upset when people like Liu Xiaobo are put in jail. But at the same time we have to be understanding. The Chinese have a very, very different context from other parts of the world.

Mahbubani: If you look at it objectively, the world's greatest power should always be focused on the world's greatest emerging power. That's a logical thing to do. Therefore the United States should be spending 90 percent of its resources focused on China. Instead, the United States is spending 90 percent of its time focused on the Islamic world, fighting unnecessary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dealing with China, of course, means integrating China into the world. By the time America wakes up to the reality of China, China will be far too big for America to do anything about it.

Now on the Islamic world and what's happening down there, the Western coverage about the Arab Spring has been, "isn't it great, there's democracy." Very few have noticed that the two leaders who were removed, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, were in office for 30 years primarily because they were supported by Western power. In fact, the removal of these rulers is part of the larger dynamic which I speak about, the unraveling of Western power in the world. We still don't know what the results will be of the Arab Spring, but whichever governments come into power in Tunisia or Egypt, they will never be as pro-Western as Ben Ali or Mubarak, because that is no longer possible.

Nye: When we talk about the recovery of Asia, which is the term that I use in my book to describe what Kishore and I agree on, Asia is not one thing. When you go to India and Japan, you'll find a great deal of fear of China. Why is it that India wants better relations with the U.S.? Why is it Japan wants better relations with the U.S.? Because of the concern about the way China's managing the rise of its hard power without equivalent soft power.

But let's go back to the Arab Spring. I think the Arab Spring is not going to lead to an increase in Chinese influence. It's not going to lead to an increase in American influence; probably a decrease in American influence. It's going to lead to more indigenous influence, and that goes back to what Dambisa said. Africans and North Africans want to do it themselves, and I think that probably is a healthy trend.

The most important thing with the Arab Spring is that it points attention to this second power shift, which we haven't spent as much time on, which is this enormous diffusion of power that comes from the information revolution.

If you looked at Egypt 15, 20 years ago, the conventional wisdom was that you had no choice between Mubarak, the autocrat, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Now this burgeoning information revolution has created not only the new middle that we saw in Tahrir Square, it provided the techniques of Facebook and Twitter that allowed them to coordinate their actions.

That doesn't make Egypt a democracy. It doesn't tell us how it's going to turn out. But it is a very different Egyptian politics from two decades ago, and it's a result of the diffusion of power.

Mahbubani: Can I agree with you?

Nye: Oh, come on, Kishore, don't spoil it now.

Mahbubani: I've actually written about this: 2010 was the worst year of Chinese diplomacy. They beat up Japan ferociously over the fishing-boat issue. They lost South Korea over the shelling in the island, and so on. I had lunch with a former Chinese diplomat and said, "What's going on here? Why are you guys screwing up so badly?" You know what he said? "Kishore, write this; criticize China." To me, it was an amazing moment to have a former Chinese diplomat telling me to criticize China, because it showed that even within China, some things are changing.

Nye: But he couldn't do it himself.

Mahbubani: Of course. But the fact that he could actually encourage me to do this was a sign of how things have changed.

Schmemmann: So, where are we headed?

Moyo: When I was growing up, we only had television from 5 until 11 p.m.— a six-hour window. We all got completely absorbed with Western society, American particularly. We all wanted to come to America, experience America.

Fast forward 20-odd years, and there are lots of questions about what's happening in America, but it doesn't mean that the psychology didn't permeate — not just me, but many other Africans on the continent. Mobile phone penetration rates in Africa are incredibly aggressive. It's very deep; I think it's about 30 percent. There's still a long way to go, but we leapfrogged a lot of the traditional technologies, whether it's standard telephony or using banks. Now people are using mobile phones for trading, for information about when a doctor's coming to your village and so on. So I'm very optimistic that information technology will be the tool to transform the thinking around politics, as well as economics.

Mahbubani: I'm wildly optimistic about the future of the world. I see in terms of my personal life and where I came from. I came from a one-room house. We shared a no-flush toilet, and I had to be put on a special feeding program when I was six years old, so I grew up in a typical third-world country. Now Singapore has a per capita income higher than the U.K., I think.

The journey that I have taken in my life I now see being repeated by hundreds of millions of people. With the doubling of the middle class, you're getting a group of people in the world who essentially want to have the same kind of peaceful, stable world order that many in America and Europe and elsewhere want. So with a larger dynamic of human history moving in a positive direction, what we've got to figure out is how we help it

to move in the positive direction, remove the obstacles. At the end of the day, 10 years from now, 20 years from now you'll see a much better world than we have today.

Nye: I tend to be on the optimistic side about the power transition among states. I do not think America is in absolute decline, and I think we can manage this relative decline that's represented by the recovery of Asia. But as for the second power shift, the diffusion that results from information technology, I think we know much less about it, and I think it poses much greater dangers, and we really haven't thought our way through that at all. We're only beginning to think about what cybersecurity and cyberinsecurity means, and you can say some of that will be good — for example, the Tahrir Square generation — some of it would be bad, the fact that an Al Qaeda-type organization could attack by sending electrons across borders without ever leaving Pakistan or wherever. We don't know the answer to this, and we don't know how it's going to affect different societies.

So on one shift I'm optimistic; on the other, to quote Dambisa earlier, the jury's still out.