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The future of the world Floating hope

An optimist offers advice for building a new and better civilisation

Feb 9th 2013 [From the print edition](#) **The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World.**

By Kishore Mahbubani. *PublicAffairs*; 315 pages; \$26.99 and £17.99. Buy

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“HOPE is on the move,” noted this paper two years ago in an editorial contrasting “the West’s growing pessimism” with the optimism felt by many people in emerging markets. Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singaporean diplomat and now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, cites the article in the introduction to his new book, which argues that humanity is “building a new and better civilisation”. Sadly he does not make a persuasive case that the world will do what is needed to bring about this new golden age.

That Asians should be more hopeful than Westerners is not surprising. Their lives now are vastly easier than those of their parents’ and their children’s prospects are even better than their own. This is “The Great Convergence” of Mr Mahbubani’s title—between the living standards of the West (which accounts for 12% of the world’s population) and nearly everyone else. The last decade has seen hundreds of millions of people lift themselves out of poverty, and fewer are dying in wars than ever before. All of this is both a consequence and cause of globalisation. As a result, argues Mr Mahbubani, the world’s countries no longer resemble “a flotilla of more than 100 separate boats”; rather, “they all live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat”. The problem, he writes, is that this boat lacks a “captain or crew”.

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He concedes that grand-scale shifts in fortune have raised quite a few problems. China’s rise has confounded international politics, and mistrust persists between the Islamic world and the West. The widespread rise in living standards also puts pressure on resources and the environment. All this would be easier to manage, he argues, if global governance bodies were stronger. Institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, the IMF and the World Bank all need to be reformed. He criticises foreign “aid” as largely self-interested and misused, and claims that a presumption of Western superiority still underlies much multilateral diplomacy. The West, he writes, has failed to adapt to the “rise of the rest”.

Such views make sense. But he provides few reasons to believe that the world will now follow his prescriptions—such as an overhaul of the United Nations—desirable though many of them may be. It hardly helps that Mr Mahbubani can be sloppy with facts. In arguing that it was Asian “engagement” as opposed to Western sanctions that produced reform in Myanmar, for example, he keeps Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest a year longer than the Burmese authorities did. He is also guilty of argument by non sequitur. He suggests that allegations of American torture invalidate American reservations about academic freedom in Singapore. And he can be cavalier with evidence. The claim that China’s government began to worry about its environment only after warnings from the United Nations Development Programme is attributed to a sole, anonymous “Chinese policymaker”.

Much of the book reads as a continuation of disparate arguments Mr Mahbubani has made over many years in his fulminations against the shortcomings of Western political leadership. The theme of “convergence” and his optimistic take on it are not enough to turn a disjointed flotilla of a book into an ocean-liner.

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