

# The Asian 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Kishore MAHBUBANI

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“The Asian 21<sup>st</sup> Century” is a compilation of essays and articles by Kishore Mahbubani that covers various topics related to the transition of power especially in the context of the geopolitical and economic rise of Asia. In this book, instead of giving an overarching definition of Asia, the author focuses on certain countries, particularly China, Japan, South Korea, India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries. The book has been divided into four sections; the first section is titled “The End of Era of Western Domination”, the second “The Asian Renaissance”, the third is comprised of articles related to “The Peaceful Rise of China”, and the last one is titled “The Globalization, Multilateralism and Cooperation.”

In the opening section, the author argues for the decline of Western domination by examining several factors, such as the Western double standard on human rights, increasing class disparities, rise of Trump, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on global politics, significance of American presidents in formulating policies, and trust deficit between the East and the West. Western domination is characterized by the advancement in the field of social and political organizations and progress in science and technology. Consequently, over the last two hundred years, they strategically controlled the political affairs and decision making process of the Asian states through multiple channels, including the knowledge, soft power, institutions and coercive diplomacy. Nevertheless, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the West has faced numerous challenges, like the war on terror, deteriorating economic stability, the rise of Trump and Plutocracy, mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic, strategic group-thinking and the rise of China which signified the potential decline in Western hegemony. Moreover, Mahbubani believed that the Western approach to promote and protect human rights predominantly remained selective and theoretical, lacking inclusivity and good will. To support the argument, he gives the example of human rights violations at Guantanamo Bay. However, the author here committed a faulty generalization by extending the example of Guantanamo Bay to represent the whole Western World. On the contrary, it is evident that Western societies have active civil

societies, well-established vibrant legal systems, and institutions to address the human rights violations, which are mentioned in the book.

In the second section, Mahbubani emphasizes the emergence of Asian century, the destabilizing role of NATO, ASEAN's resilience, East Asia's governance approaches, India's unique and valuable role in contemporary times, the West's strategic goals for Asia, and prospects of Asia-United States (US) cooperation. The author posits that China and India were the largest economies until 1820 but afterwards, they experienced colonialization, control and humiliation by the Western powers. For instance, the British exploited India's resources, imposed taxes and marginalized local industry. China was also forced to open its trade during the Opium Wars which led to unequal treaties that granted the West substantial concessions. The events are marked as the beginning of the "Century of Humiliation" and consequently, both the great powers, once rose to prominence but eventually declined. However, in this work the author seems to attribute Asia's decline solely to Western control and ignores the internal dynamics, like political instability, economic challenges, non-scientific approaches, and lack of adaptability to modernization. The author also critiques NATO's expanding global influence while praising ASEAN's resilience in maintaining regional centrality. ASEAN, alongside with China and Japan, in negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest economic partnership, comprising of fifteen countries including ASEAN members, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, intends to deepen economic cooperation and to reduce the reliance on Western markets. The ASEAN's resilience and role in forming the RCEP is a significant step for regional cooperation, though not exclusive to Asia as the European Union (EU) also exemplifies such efforts. He also commends Asia in handling Covid-19, but overlooks the fact that some Western countries, Australia and New Zealand, also took effective initiatives to combat the pandemic.

In the third section, Mahbubani presents the diverse perspectives on China's rise and its implications for global politics, debating whether it poses a threat or opportunity by exploring Donald Trump and Joe Biden's plan to combat and engage China, Post Covid-19 pandemic and China, countering the anti-China alliance efforts and the Asian inheritance of Western power structure. The author develops the argument in favor of the peaceful rise of China, and condemns the behavior and strategies of the West, such as undermining the Chinese political system, trade war, the US withdrawal from trans pacific partnership, the containment of China, and the formation of Quad 2.0, to contain China. The author claims that China has no intent to invade the US, but he ignores the strategic competition between the US and China. For instance, intellectual property theft, unfair trade practices, forced transfer of technology and the emerging market of artificial intelligence (AI) have tensed the relations of both countries. He appears confident about China's peaceful rise, while downplaying the territorial disputes of China with its neighbors and the Taiwan issue.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Oishi, Mikio and Fumitaka Furuoka. 2013. The East Asian Peace and The Pax Americana: Challenges for The Co-Existence of Two Peaces. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 10, 37: 95-116.

In the last section, the author discusses the evolving nature of globalization and multilateralism including the role of the United Nations (UN), diplomacy and prospects of rethinking global governance. The author suggests that globalization, led by the West, relied on three pillars, the establishment of the UN or rules based order, the idea of comparative advantage, and the leadership role of the US and the EU in promoting free trade. He acknowledges globalization's role in lifting millions of people out of poverty across the world and revolutionizing communication which eased the exchange of ideas. While noting the West's significant benefits from globalization, he censures the Bretton Woods system for remaining under the control of the US and the EU, as a consequence the economic system was not able to evolve over time to serve broader global interests. Additionally, the UN Security Council is dominated by the five permanent members, the US, China, Russia, the UK and France, who influence determining global decisions.. The author seems inconsistent. As in the previous section, he discusses the decline of the West, yet in this one he suggests that the West still has dominance over global institutions. Furthermore, the author highlights that non-traditional security threats should be taken seriously and collaboration between the states is necessary to combat pandemics and the climate issue. On the climate issue, international collaboration is already underway, the Paris Agreement is a great example in this regard as it demonstrates the global commitment to address this burning issue.

To conclude, the term "Asian Century", which is central to the book, has not been properly defined and conceptualized. Moreover, the specific values that Asian Nations can offer the world, especially in terms of a political or economic systems beyond the Bretton Woods framework, are not clearly identified. The role of ASEAN, India and China has also been discussed but the significance of Japan, an important Asian Power and ally of the US, is disregarded. The author claims a compelling case about the decline of the West and rise of Asia but it appears he has oversimplified and presented a unilateral perspective. Notwithstanding, it is a tremendous work that provides an Asian perspective on global politics and the emerging Asian Century.