

## Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy

Kishore Mahbubani; Public Affairs, New York; 2020, Pg564.

**Quratul Ain**<sup>1</sup>

The world is witnessing a geopolitical contest between a status quo power, America, and a rising power, China. Each day brings a new change in the evolving relationship between the two powers with significant consequences for the rest of the world. All international affairs pundits have set their eyes on the changing scenarios between America and China predicting future scenarios of conquest. In times like these, a highly captivating and informative piece on the power tilt between America and China by an expert diplomat and scholastic guru, Kishore Mahbubani, is the right book to read.

Kishore Mahbubani is a former diplomat and a Singaporean academician. Due to his service of thirty-three years at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed by his president's position at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the author holds deep knowledge of international affairs. He imparts his knowledge to the academic strata as a distinguished fellow of the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute.

Mahbubani's book, "Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy," is in essence as speculative as the title suggests. It does not out-rightly declare the answer to the question enumerated in the title. The author's summed-up speculation is that a supreme

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewer is a Research Intern at Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Pakistan.

geopolitical conquest between China and America is sure to occur and cannot be ignored. This contest according to the author may bring on an inconsequential and massive tragedy, which has been sped up by COVID-19.

Strategic competition between America and China, according to the author, has been sparked by misunderstandings and mistakes on the part of both parties. Initially, China made a blunder alienating America's business community with its cyber intrusions, forced intellectual property transfers and theft, and non-compliance to agreements together with official arrogance in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Therefore, contrary to the past trends, the American business community did not stand up in supporting China against Donald Trump's trade war. In the author's view, America made a more serious strategic blunder by initiating a geopolitical contest with China having no long-term, comprehensive plan for dealing with a state like China. Mahbubani enumerated these assessments through discussions with the famous political scientist and American diplomat, Henry Kissinger.

The book is made all the more interesting by surprising the readers with unanticipated comparisons. Mahbubani argues that America was more flexible and coherent in policies during the Cold War, while there was inflexibility and rigidity visible in the Soviet Union's attitude. In the current situation, America's name should be replaced by China while the Soviet Union's by America specifically in the case of defence spending.

The book's analysis of America is well structured, accurately acknowledging its widespread inequality, high incarceration rates, senseless plunders in international conflicts, and disparaging domestic politics. However, he has fiercely defended China's authoritarian government. The current Chinese government is deemed the most meritocratic as well as successful in China's history, according to

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Mahbubani's assessment. His enthusiastic claims on Chinese values surpassing American values depict the back draws in his assessments. According to the book, expansionism has never been on China's agenda. This goes contrary to China's approach in Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. Mahbubani is just as loud in praising Chinese leaders as he is in criticising their American counterparts. He writes "President Xi Jinping's removal of term limits was vital to counter corruption and factionalism. There is a very strong potential that Xi could provide to China the beneficent kind of rule provided by a philosopher king."

The book is spelled out fairly well with Mahbubani's manner of writing, giving way to a clear understanding as well as analysis on the part of the reader. The book begins strongly with a clear outlook and expectations of ideas to be dissected by the author. Stimulating questions are put forward by Mahbubani, but no completely structured or clear answers are given which can be deeply scrutinised. The question posed in the title of the book is not directly answered by Mahbubani till the end. Despite the author's explicit disapproval of American policies, its various strengths are rightfully acknowledged as well like America's individualistic culture, best universities, and its attractiveness for the best and the brightest around the globe.

The author has given highly controversial ideas such as Chinese civilisation not on a mission to enforce its model and ideas on other nations, but an innocent, progressive nation making its place in the power-mongering international order. This will not be an easy intake for the enlarging groups claiming China as a global villain. These controversial ideas also include the author's depiction of Chinese leaders as extremely benevolent, ambitious, and non-interfering considering themselves as the good guys, striving for their development amiss evil intentions of hurting others.

*Book Review*

The author, while heavily criticising Western liberal solutions, has exalted the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) portraying it as an accumulation of technocrats and an effective meritocracy. Any specific wishes of China to be dominant are very less in comparison to America's hegemonic ambitions. The author has selected different, famous as well and lesser-known tales to support his claims. With his personal experiences and diplomatic expertise, few of the tales are very interesting despite their one-sided conclusions.

Due to the author's explicit criticism and displeasure with America's policies, many readers may categorise the book as partisan and prejudicial guided by the author's inherent biases. The book, despite its extreme position, should be read to comprehend geopolitics from mainly Eastern perspective of current affairs. In post-COVID era, the world is accusing China for stalling the entire world by causing the virus. Such books are even more valuable to understand China's actual intentions in the face of what the world is accusing them of. ■