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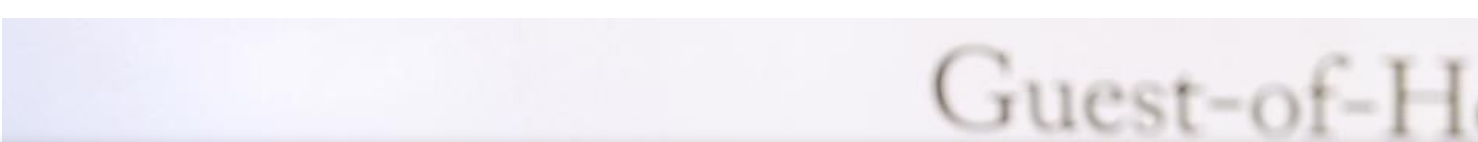
# The West Has Lost Its Dominant Global Position, And It Should Handle Its Decline Gracefully

World Economic ForumContributor

Leadership Strategy

by Philip Shetler-Jones

Veteran diplomat and philosophical provocateur Kishore Mahbubani in his new book asks a question that has crossed many minds of late: “Has the West lost it?”



Kishore Mahbubani delivers a speech, on October 25, 2011 in Paris, during the launch of the French... [-]

If “it” is the dominant position of Europeans and North Americans in the world, then yes. The rest of the world has caught up and are overtaking the West because they received and applied the gift of Western wisdom – i.e., scientific reason and an approach to governance where the rulers accept are accountable to their people, not the other way around. In this sense, the West is the victim of the success of its own ideas.

Today in: Leadership

But it is worse than that. The West lost it in a fit of blind hubris in the aftermath of the Cold War. Giddy with victory over communism, lulled by the “opiate” of the “End of History,” the West rested complacent that the Rest would converge on their model yet remain subordinate. Conformation bias sustained the delusion. The 1989 Tiananmen incident was read as a signal that Communist China was heading the way of the Soviet Union, the 1987 Asian financial crisis welcomed as a sign that the Asian miracle had crashed. Professor Mahbubani’s 2001 provocation was “Can Asians Think?”. This book deploys statistics showing how the societies of the Rest have been steadily marching toward middle class status while the West spent precious time marching into “suicidal” wars.

The case is generally well made that the West acts without thinking things through, and, now that the Rest have the capacity to push back this just won’t do. However, it is historically questionable to assert that the West “further humiliated the already humiliated Russia” and “if the West had shown respect for Russia instead of humiliating it, Putin would not have happened” when the sole item of supporting evidence is NATO expansion. This theme of Russia having been humiliated by the West became prominent in Russian politics later but in 2000 Putin campaigned more on law and order and a tougher policy in Chechnia. Asked if Russia would become part of NATO, he replied “why not?”

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So much for the diagnosis, what's the remedy?

If “hubris” describes how the West lost its way at the end of the Cold War then the road back is through a “**minimalist**” approach. No more bombing other countries or meddling in their politics. Cries of the indispensability of the West for global order should not be heeded. Professor Mahbubani expands on this noting that Western leaders who speak honestly about the big changes in the balance of wealth and productivity in the world have yet to emerge. That the workers have understood this power shift while the experts have not has eroded trust in elites who thought they know all the answers, hence the polarization and populism afflicting Western politics.

The second step is to drop unilateral action and work through “**multilateral**” institutions, specifically, the United Nations General Assembly. The rebalance of power in favour of the Rest anyway forces the West to engage less through force (the Rest are too strong now) and more by understanding and persuasion.

The third recommendation is to be “**Machiavellian**”, i.e. think before acting and formulate policies that serve the West’s long term global interests. For example: American and European interests have diverged. America’s primary strategic challenge is China, Europe’s is the Islamic world at its doorstep. Europe should deploy “strategic cunning” and make up with Russia to deal with the Islamic world. America should make peace with the Islamic world and deal with China, not by confronting it militarily, but as an economic competitor. Attract the best and brightest students and scientists in the world. On present trends China will soon be able to outspend the US in military terms anyway, so agree to withdraw US forces from a neutral unified Korea.

Overall the diagnosis is compelling and the remedy follows logically from it, but will this advice be heeded?

This narrative depicts a West trapped by its belief that it can only thrive by remaining dominant over the Rest. So for this advice to work, it needs to change how it sees itself and its place in the world. Perhaps the central “tough love” message of this short book is that the West is declining in relative power and if it tries to fight this trend it will fail and cause trouble all the way down. Therefore it should make the best of its situation by positioning itself so that it can continue to prosper even from a weaker position.

This philosophical approach of winning while losing or gaining it all by letting go seems wise, but can it work on the Western audience? Aristotle trained the Western ear to respond to a combination of *logos* (factual argument), *pathos* (emotional appeal) and *ethos* (the authority of the person voicing the argument). This book comes with a decent helping of *ethos*, based on the author’s track record as an insightful and sharp critic with experience on the front lines of high level diplomacy [2]. Mahbubani emphasises “reason” as the essential Western value and commends Machiavelli on following a path of cool calculation, so *logos* is well covered. But *Pathos* is in short supply. Thucydides said all wars in history are caused by fear, honour and interest, so a *logos*-heavy argument leaves much to be said on the West’s fear of being dominated (*pathos*), and its need for honour (*ethos*) in a world that took it’s values as universal. If one puts reason at the heart of the West’s material success, its handling of Islam and Russia do look like strategic mistakes. But fear and pride also explain the West’s missionary tendency to “meddle” in others’ affairs.

Professor Mahbubani fairly states the question “Has the West lost It?” answering that no, it has merely mislaid it and it can get it back. The provocation is constructive, challenging the West to find a new sense of itself that is de-coupled from its status as number one.

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