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Can India lead? | Kishore Mahbubani

The world needs a deeper understanding of the structural flaws of our current order as well as a concerted attempt to address these flaws

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Two speeches given by the Prime Ministers of India and UK in late 2006 vividly illustrate the problems we face in the current international order. The world needs a deeper understanding of the structural flaws of our current order as well as a concerted attempt to address these flaws. The big question here is: Can India provide the leadership to achieve this?

On 7 December 2006, Manmohan Singh gave a thoughtful speech describing some serious problems with the current international order. He added that the world needed to accommodate the rise of Asia. In his words: "Just as the world accommodated the rejuvenation of Europe in the post-War world, it must now accommodate the rise of new Asian economies in the years that lie ahead. What this means is that we need global institutions and new global 'rules of the game' that can facilitate the peaceful rise of new nations in Asia." Sadly, this significant speech was ignored by the international media.

By contrast, when Blair spoke a few weeks earlier (on 13 November 2006) and called for a "whole Middle East" strategy, his speech was blared to all corners of the globe. In his words: "On the contrary, we should start with Israel/Palestine. That is the core. We should then make progress on Lebanon. We should unite all moderate Arab and Muslim voices behind a push for peace in those countries but also in Iraq. We should be standing up for empowering, respecting those with a moderate and modern view of the faith of Islam everywhere."

The western-dominated international media saw it as completely "natural" to ignore Manmohan Singh and publicize Blair. What they don't "see" is the distorting lens that this western media uses in describing contemporary realities. By any rational calculation, the international reporting should have taken a completely opposite pattern.

Blair is a decent man. He has brought considerable charm, good looks and an acute intelligence to his job. But history will be unkind to him. His foreign policies have been close to disastrous. It is ironical that Blair should call for the "moderate Muslims" to stand up. His support for the disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq, as well as his failure to persuade Bush to solve the Israel-Palestine issue, has undercut the standing and effectiveness of moderate Muslims everywhere. His November 2006 speech said nothing new. Several months later, it is also clear that nothing came of it. The western-dominated international media could have safely ignored it. It made no difference to human history. It was only another sad reflection of the failed western policies in the Middle East—failed policies which have jeopardized both the West and the rest of the world.

Manmohan Singh is an even more decent man. Unlike Blair, history will be kind to him. Although modest and soft-spoken, he has played a pivotal role in engineering the re-emergence of India as a major power. Despite his close alliance with Bush, Blair has received no foreign policy dividends. By contrast, Manmohan Singh secured the legitimization of the Indian nuclear programme. Manmohan Singh has also bravely pushed forward the Indian economic reform programme, even though he has to fight hard to hold together a coalition government. Against the odds, he has kept India's economy roaring. In the last quarter of 2006, the Indian economy grew by 9.2%. Hence, when Manmohan Singh called for a reform of the international order, the western media should have broadcast it to all corners, rather than ignore it.

To be fair, the "distorting lens" of the western-dominated international media is not the only reason why Indian speeches on international issues are often ignored.

There is still a strong ambiguity about the actual direction of India's foreign policies. India wants both to cling to non-alignment and to be accepted as an independent major power. It is hard to pursue both roles at the same time.

India is also reluctant to go the full distance in analysing the real difficulties that need to be overcome to reform the multilateral system.

Take the case of the reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The open-ended Working Group on UNSC Reform (which the wags now call the "never-ending Working Group") has been meeting since 1993. Nothing has changed. India's main proposal for reform is to add more permanent members (or more vetoes). Why should the rest of the world accept more vetoes? If it does not further their interests, why support it?

There is a way forward for UNSC reform. But it will take some

courage to push it. The principle of "permanent" members is correct. The major powers should be anchored in the UN system, not kept out. However, for UNSC to remain relevant, it should reflect the power configuration of 2007, not 1945. A new comprehensive and flexible system allowing renewal and revitalization of UNSC membership is needed. But it also needs to include elements that would appeal to the rest of the world to support it. They would happily support a UNSC where the UNSC "permanent" members accepted responsibilities commensurate with their privileges. This is a cardinal principle found in any democratic system. Every powerful position comes with responsibility and accountability.

As the world's largest democracy, India would have tremendous credibility in pushing forward this principle. And when it does, the answer to the question "Can India Lead?" will be a resounding "YES"!

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