

# Asia rising – but not at the expense of the West

BY ALFRED BALITZER  
*For The Straits Times*

PROFESSOR Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, has been busy in the United States promoting his new book on television shows, the lecture circuit and blogs and in op-ed pieces.

Provocatively entitled *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift Of Power To The East*, the book asserts that Asia is rising as the new force in the world at the expense of the West, particularly the United States, which is sinking.

My response is: Not so fast, Prof Mahbubani!

Predicting inevitabilities is always risky. Prof Mahbubani's argument recalls the 1980s arguments about "Asian Values" – that they were responsible for the Asian economic miracles and that they were superior to so-called Western values, especially American values. That argument died a quiet death with the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Since the Reagan administration, the US, a two-ocean nation, has been making progress in recognising the importance of Asia as a partner for prosperity, security and peace. It would be fair to note that Iraq has sucked the air out of most other American foreign policy interests.

Iraq, however, cannot derail the fact that the US is a Pacific power, sharing this great ocean with other nations that have been drawn closer by modern communications. As part of its responsibilities as a Pacific power, the US has a vast naval presence in the Pacific. None of the rising powers of Asia, including China, is likely to match that power soon.

Americans welcome Asia's rising economic power. The standard of living of millions of people will be improved. But though economic power is a key indicator of a nation or region's strength, it does not translate automatically into military, political or moral power.

To cite an example: When President George W. Bush called a conference in Annapolis last

year to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, all the nations of the world sought admission.

The same would not have happened if Chinese or Indian leaders called a conference on some global issue.

Contrary to what Prof Mahbubani suggests, there is no simple connection between economic power and military power. The former Soviet Union was a superpower, but it had a Third World economy.

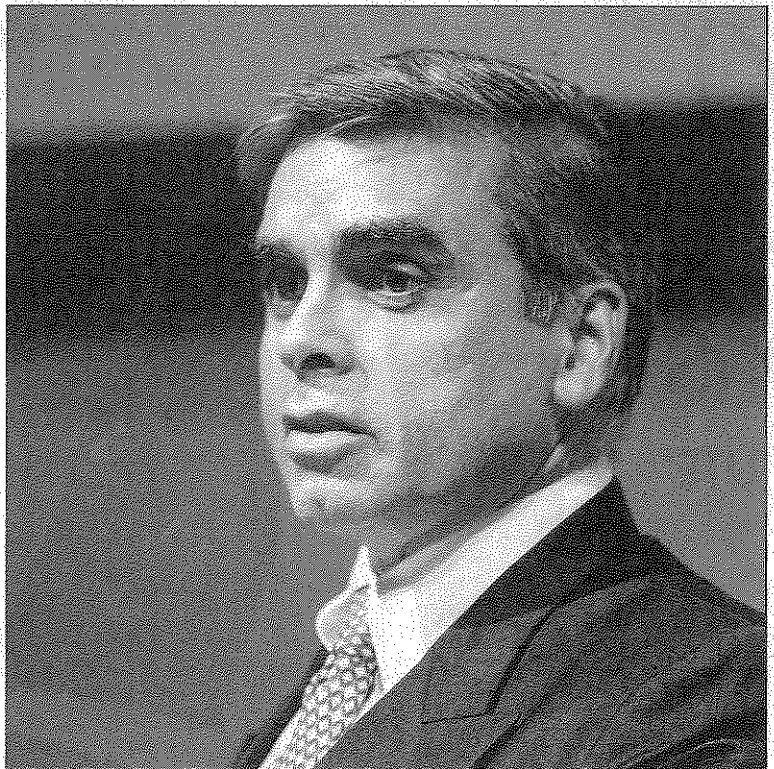
Proclaiming the decline of the West is a cottage industry. The prolific dean did not create this industry. That honour belongs to Oswald Spengler's *Decline Of The West*, which appeared in 1918. The corrupting materialism of the West, Spengler argued, would cause its decline. By contrast, Prof Mahbubani says the West will decline because it is not materialistic enough.

American elites have recently proclaimed a renewal of hope with the success of Mr Barack Obama in the Democratic presidential race. Surprisingly, Prof Mahbubani too has embraced Mr Obama's call for "change". But he fails to mention that Obama-style change would mean greater influence for organised labour and more barriers to the free flow of trade between the US and Asian nations.

Prof Mahbubani is concerned about growing American protectionism – and so am I. Protectionism is the other side of the coin from isolationism. That is a position Americans feel far more comfortable with than engagement, internationalism and globalism.

Prof Mahbubani argues for changes in the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations to give Asia a greater role in these organisations. I am sure that I speak for most of my countrymen when I say: Go for it!

Given the frequency with which Americans recite the mantra "Get the UN out of the US and get the US out of the UN", there would be little objection if the UN, the IMF and World Bank were moved to Beijing or Delhi. As Americans pay the larger share of the operations of these organisations, they would warmly surrender, as would I, the responsibility of paying for



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## PROUD...BUT WRONG

**Prof Mahbubani (above) is rightfully proud of the economic advances made by China, India and Asean. He is also correct that Asia should receive greater attention from the US and that Asian nations should play a greater role in international bodies. But he is wrong, dead wrong, in making this a case of who is rising and who is declining.**

them to the new Asian economic superpowers.

Prof Mahbubani is rightfully proud of the economic advances made by China, India and Asean. He is also correct that Asia should receive greater attention from the US and that Asian nations should play a greater role in international bodies. But he is wrong, dead wrong, in making this a case of who is rising and who is declining, for this kind of one-upmanship does nothing to advance cooperation and understanding between nations.

Perhaps the 21st century will

be the Asian century – although that history has yet to be written. As for Americans, we were never particularly covetous of paying for a pax Americana with our tax dollars. The US was thrust into a global role as a matter of necessity, not of choice.

If or when the US should fall from first place – a history that has also yet to be written – Americans will not be troubled. What Prof Mahbubani sees as a competition just doesn't speak to the core of how Americans understand their national identity and mission.

The writer is a senior fellow at the Claremont Graduate University