

Has the West really lost it?

A new book by former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani, *Has The West Lost It? A Provocation*, argues that the West has failed to keep pace with changing times. But is 'the Rest' of the world any more ready?

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For *The Straits Times*

This year marks the centenary of the first volume of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline Of The West*. It argued that history should not be divided, as it was in the Eurocentric view, into progression from ancient to mediaeval to modern. Instead, history is the staging ground for the rise and fall of high cultures.

Spengler's key cultures were Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Mayan/Aztec, Greek/Roman, Arabian and European/American. Cultures flourish for about 1,000 years before they decline for an equal period, he argued. His message was ominous for the European/American ascendancy in global history.

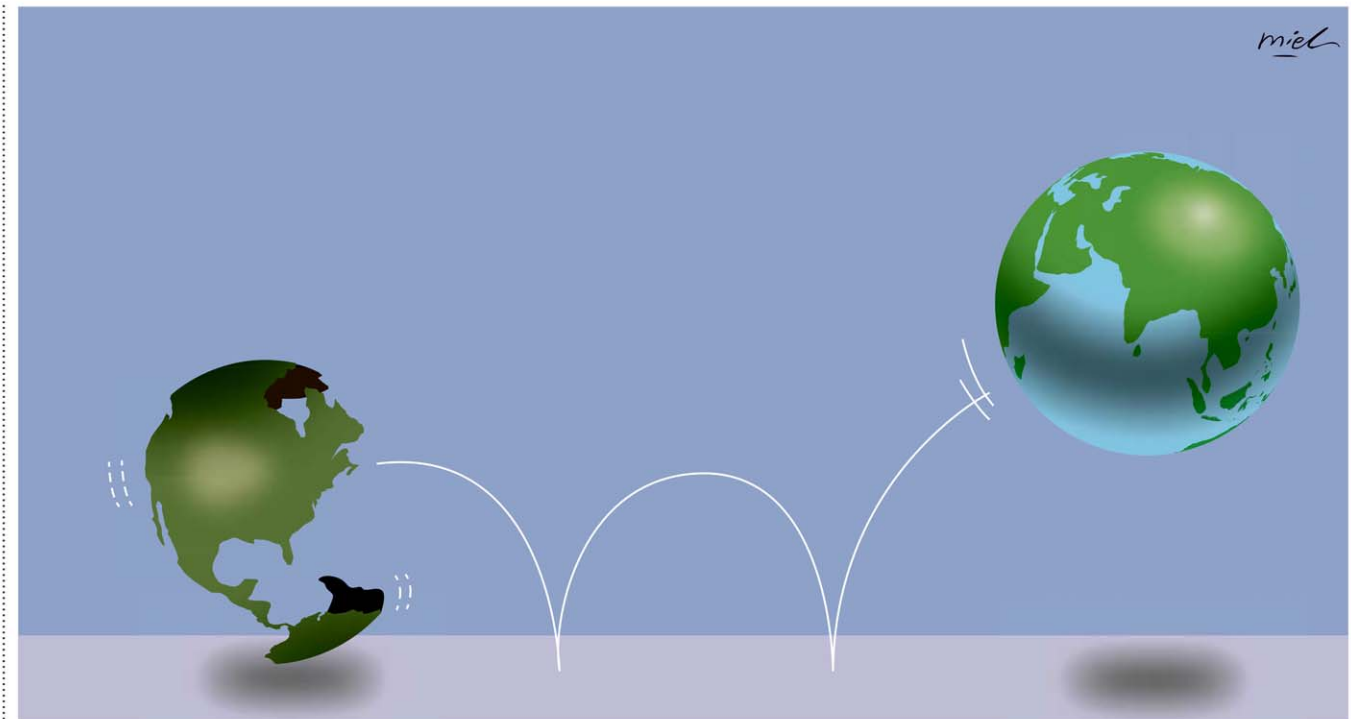
Spengler caught his audience by frightened surprise, but his warning was premature. The West has survived his predictions by outliving two world wars and the Cold War, in all of which it was the chief protagonist. A century after Spengler wrote, the avowed decline of the West is still being debated vigorously.

The latest proof of that debate is the publication of *Has The West Lost It? A Provocation*. In the book, Professor Kishore Mahbubani of the National University of Singapore castigates the failure of the West to keep in step with changing times.

The crux of his argument is that the West is going against the forces of globalisation that it has released. The combined effects of those forces are seen in a range of global successes: freedom from feudal thinking, consolidation of good governance as the political norm, economic emancipation evident in falling poverty rates and greater access to education and information, a global expansion of travel, and a decrease in battlefield deaths.

In the midst of this "explosive improvement in the human condition", however, the West's share of the global economy is shrinking, driving it into an untenable defensive. As it loses jobs to energetic countries overseas and wage stagnation sets in at home, it is not making its citizens globally competitive. Instead, the West "is flailing about, attacking Iraq, bombing Syria, sanctioning Russia and baiting China".

Although the book does not describe those developments in these terms, they are but classic symptoms of what is called power transition. When power shifts away



from a dominant country or system, it destroys what it helped to build so that its creations cannot be used against it by rising powers. Those challengers are obliged to build, if they can, on the ruins left behind by the retreating hegemon.

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Prof Mahbubani, a former diplomat and former dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, makes a plaintive call to the West to recover the best within itself that once produced convergence with its emancipatory values in "the Rest" – 88 per cent of the world.

He invites the West to rejoin the march of global history by abjuring its reflexive penchant for political

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and military intervention. He berates the West rightly for humiliating Russia at the end of the Cold War by expanding the frontiers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) to Russia's borders. That act paved the way for the eventual rise of the Russian arch-nationalist Vladimir Putin, who mocked Western arrogance by annexing Crimea.

As for the Western invasion of Iraq in 2003, it undermined stability in the Middle East and infuriated Muslims across the world who watched their co-religionists being bombed into submission.

Western hubris was apparent in both cases. Instead of that pride, the book argues, the West should use diplomatic means through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations to influence but not dominate other countries.

WILD WEST, WILDER REST

This is sound advice. But why should the West heed it? Why should it seek to influence but not dominate? Who does so, anyway? After all, powerful nations do not exist to make the world a better place for all. They strive to make the world the best place for themselves, followed by their subordinate allies and other partners which could switch sides.

Thus, the United States sought to create a liberal internationalist global order after World War II to meet the countervailing power of the Soviet Union, contain its sway to Eastern Europe, and blunt its reach to decolonised nations. The Cold War played out that contest.

The implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 inaugurated the global rise of post-communist China. Today, it is using its

economic and military clout to refashion the global order.

China's Belt and Road Initiative, which would link it infrastructurally to 70 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and Oceania, seeks to put the US in its contracting economic place.

Beijing's military advances in the South China Sea display calculated disdain for a global maritime regime because it is associated ultimately with a US that is unwilling or unable to assert its military primacy in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the long aftermath of the Cold War, China is moving actively to expand its strategic space. Russia has stepped up to the same global plate, India could be next in line, and Japan may not wait long to follow.

Why should the West allow them to inherit its mantle? Why should it let them profit from its decline? Instead, why not block the rise of the Rest if it can?

The West does enjoy certain advantages. The West is a single strategic entity. That is, no member of that historical club conceivably can go to war with another. They may have done so not too long ago – during the Second World War, for instance – but they are not likely to do so today. No matter how much the US and the European Union might disagree, Washington will not nuke Berlin. Even post-Brexit London will not attack Paris. Rome is safe from Amsterdam. Vienna does not fear Warsaw.

That is not the case in Asia. Asia's strategic geography is contested internally by China's revival, India's countervailing rise, Japan's insecurity in the face of an assertive China, and Korea's divided destiny.

Prof Mahbubani suggests that the economic rise of China and India could be a potential antidote to Western hegemony, without mentioning how many missiles in either country is pointed towards the economic success of the other.

National animosity is not exclusive to Asia, of course. Prickly national identities once defined relations among Britain, France and Germany. It took two world wars to force unwanted coexistence on those great powers before the Cold War solidified the regional partnership through the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor to the European Union.

The community made war between France and Germany materially impossible by placing the industrial production of coal and steel – without which they could not fight – under a centralised authority. Peace became the default mode of Europe's economic existence.

Asia needs to catch up with that European past if it is to re-enter the Spenglerian paradigm and take its place in world affairs.

The West might or might not have lost the world but the Rest will have to evolve historically if it is to gain it. It is difficult to see the West share power with the Rest as the latter is constituted currently.

If the Rest does evolve, the US may strike a new relationship with it, as it did with Europe. If not, 2118 will mark the bicentenary of Spengler's unrealised fears of the decline of the West.

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