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*Opinion*

## Amid US hysteria over China's rise, the world is in need of more voices of reason



- Academic Kishore Mahbubani's latest book again makes the case that the West should not seek to stop the inevitable Chinese resurgence and should instead try to work with it
- Conflict with China is a confrontation the West cannot afford to wage, or lose

**Tom Plate**

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Singapore diplomat turned academic Kishore Mahbubani promotes the need to avoid fighting that last big superpower war, and to accept the inevitability of the rise of China. Photo: Handout

Let me ask you: would you be foolish enough to persist in advocating a balanced-sensible approach to China amid this murderous coronavirus crisis, for which so many blame Beijing? In this poisoned atmosphere of global suspicion and recrimination, would you try to buck the anti-China fever, as I will here?

Especially if you are in Hong Kong, where the "one country, two systems" trope looks increasingly to be on a slippery slide into "one country and just shut up". The round-up of anti-government critics and protest leaders, even if designed by the Hong Kong government to double down on security, only adds to the optics of an evil Beijing.

China is starting to lose a measure of international esteem, and one special person in particular needs to review the loss. President Xi Jinping pointedly allowed state intrusion into the business sectors, narrowed the intellectual broadband of its best universities, arrested anyone thought corrupt (or irritating), and tested the boundaries of China's sea and economic adventures.

Though US President Donald Trump claims a good relationship with Xi, almost no one in Washington now publicly claims that China's continued rise is good for the US. Almost anyone trying to offer a balanced view on China these days runs the risk of being viewed as unbalanced.

Even otherwise sensible Americans are "recalibrating" where they stand as they tack ever closer to a darker view of China. More sophisticated counterviews tend to come from scholars and journalists in the Asia-Pacific region itself. Living much closer to the awakened giant, they have a lot at stake and know they must get it right.

Kishore Mahbubani, the first dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and a former Singapore ambassador to the UN, is the author of a bookshelf of original, feisty thinking about China, the US and Asia. He can be brutally blunt, and is ever ready to prick Western hot air balloons.

Though denounced as anti-American by some, he offers unconventional deep thinking about our future, into which the younger generation is about to be pushed.

Professor Mahbubani's latest work, *Has China Won?*, is comprehensive in its overview of East-West relations. But it is still, thankfully, deeply irreverent. Its timing is problematic, though, landing as it does on the glacier of a glum US-China relationship.

The truth is that China is a frightfully hard sell in the West now. Cross-Pacific paranoia is at a peak. It is said that US intelligence is aiming to figure out whether there was a coronavirus leak at a Wuhan lab, and even whether it was deliberate – as if an under-the-table invasion. Silly? Right now, a sizeable number of the polled US public appear to buy into this.

With China shoved in our face like a doppelgänger of the former Soviet Union, the US political establishment conjures up a recycling of the intellectual ghost of the late George Kennan, who articulated the idea of "containment" as the strategy most likely to prove effective given the Soviet hulk.

By contrast, Mahbubani promotes the need to avoid fighting that last big superpower war and to accept the inevitability of the rise of China – and Asia. Rather than aim to outmuscle history, better to be like water (as someone once put it) and avoid a confrontation that the West cannot possibly afford to wage, but also cannot afford to lose. This is the carefully drawn Mahbubani marker.

In explicating China's rise, there's more than a touch of Hegelian-style inevitability, but no trace of Marxism. A product of Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, with its bespoke city state capitalism, the Indian-born scholar is hardly pro-Communist but openly pro-Chinese.

For him, China's life force is anything but communistic and is all about being Chinese. As he writes: "Unlike the Soviet Communist Party, [the Chinese Communist Party] is not riding on an ideological

wave; it is riding the wave of a resurgent civilisation ... the strongest and most resilient civilisations in history.”

And so, maybe now is the right time for more people like Mahbubani. For if, perhaps, we can accept China at its worst, we will be better able to appreciate China when at its best.

How often do we come across a writer who revels in discomfoting truth-telling and yet still provides a sense of comfort due to his clarity of vision as to where we might be headed? Mahbubani is, I believe, on the right side of history.

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