Has China Won? by Kishore Mahbubani review — America and China's battle for supremacy

The US will only have itself to blame if it loses its fight with its superpower rival.

Max Hastings

In 1945 the United States was the planet's dominant force, with half its entire GDP: it became the only leading participant of the Second World War to show a profit. Half a century later it was also victor of the Cold War, still indisputably numero uno. The American genius — and such a thing assuredly exists — was arming its brightest and best to tower over the new technologies that would dominate the 21st century.

Today, America is in a crisis caused by forces that may be intensified by the coronavirus, but preceded it. Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean academic and former diplomat who has served as president of the UN Security Council, here delivers a blistering analysis of its fall from grace.

No US politician, he writes, dares to tell their own people the harsh truth, that its global economic primacy is coming to an end for reasons that have little to do with "unfair" foreign competition. In 1990 it still had 20.6% of the world's GDP, while China had only 3.86%; in 2018 America had 15%, China 18.6%.

America "taught the world that free trade was good", but now embraces protectionism. Since 9/11 it has squandered nearly $5tn on fighting unnecessary and unsuccessful wars in a region, the Middle East, where it has no rational interest. Its insistence that liberal democracy represents the rightful path for all societies is no longer credible, if it ever was. Whereas America had many brilliant public servants during the Cold War, today Chinese representatives at any international gathering are likely to be smarter, as US diplomacy has been relegated to sub-prime status.

America, says the author, "no longer has an exemplary, just and well-ordered society". Power and wealth have become concentrated in the hands of a self-serving elite, while ordinary folk languish: "Most Americans are unaware that the average income of the bottom 50% of their population has declined over a 30-year period."

The nation's soft power, drawn from international respect for its culture and values, has shrunk. Billions of people who once looked up to America as a towering force for good now see its government as having forfeited the right to lecture other countries — including China — about human rights abuses, having indulged the reintroduction of torture and pardoned a convicted war criminal in its armed forces.

Above all, Mahbubani writes, the US seems set upon demonising China as a fount of evil, a scapegoat for problems that are in truth homegrown. If the US persists on its present course, he suggests, all mankind will be losers in a clash between the world's two powers; it could be avoided with a measure of wisdom on both sides.

This book was written before Covid-19, which has drastically raised tensions between China and the West, and indeed caused European nations to join Washington in expressing disgust about

China's opacity concerning the outbreak of the virus. However, nothing in the latest exchanges of abuse negates Mahbubani's thesis that scapegoatery is no substitute for a rational strategy.

Throughout the Cold War, he says, US wise men pursued a carefully crafted policy of containment, rooted in George Kennan's brilliant 1946 "long telegram" from Moscow. At almost every turn Washington administrations resisted cheap shots and quick fixes — for instance, rejecting calls for interventions in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968.

Their diplomats understood the Soviets; few Americans today understand the Chinese. The White House rides roughshod over Beijing's sensitivities about Taiwan: "There is a real danger that [John] Bolton or someone like him may initiate or trigger a series of actions that could force China to take military action across the Taiwan Strait … a Chinese leader who is seen to be weak on Taiwan becomes politically vulnerable."

The above may suggest that this is an anti-American book, which it is not. The author displays enormous respect for what the US has been, and hopes — like much of the West — it can return to its former glory. He is merely dismayed, for all our sakes, by its current refusal to accept unwelcome realities and adopt realistic policies. He follows Richard Haass, Graham Allison and other sages in demanding that it should come to terms with the fact that it no longer possesses the moral, military or economic authority to get its own way with everything.

Mahbubani condemns the arrogance and rudeness of the Chinese, writes of their huge folly in antagonising American business with bullying trading practices and international property theft. Both China and America are complicit, he says, in what should be an overarching source of shame; their indifference to the planetary threat posed by global warming, which is more dangerous than all the issues dividing them.

Nonetheless, the book's weakness is that while it justly condemns American follies and misjudgments, it lets off Chinese authoritarianism, and its ruthless repression of human and civil rights, far too lightly. This indulgence towards Beijing, which conducts a profoundly nasty polity, does no service to the rest of the author's thesis.

His understanding of America's immense residual power, though, causes him to reject the inevitability of a Chinese triumph. The US still possesses huge creative, technological and educational strengths, reflected in the supremacy of its universities — provided these assets are not set at naught by ill-judged government policies. If, however, both sides continue to behave rashly, even recklessly, then a headlong collision and possible American defeat seem all too plausible.

A year or two ago I observed to a friend who knows Asia well that after many centuries as victims of appalling treatment from the West, the Chinese seem to deserve their time in the sun. "You may be right," she responded cautiously and wisely, "but I don't think they will be very kind."

Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy by Kishore Mahbubani