

Pax Asiatica: The Search for a New Regional Order

Reviewed by David Plott



**The New Asian Hemisphere:
The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East**

By Kishore Mahbubani

Public Affairs, 336 pages, US\$26.00



Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics

By William H. Overholt

Cambridge University Press, 366 pages, US\$24.99



The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order

Edited by G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon

Rowman & Littlefield, 345 pages, US\$29.95

IT WOULD BE MISLEADING to place at the doorstep of the George W. Bush administration all of the blame for the poor standing of America in the world today. To be sure, the caustic unilateralism of the neo-conservatives who have driven much of American foreign policy for the past eight years, and their appetite for military solutions, has been responsible for pushing perceptions of the US to their lowest level in years. At no time since the end of World War II — when America began to define the world order that prevailed until now — has American leadership been in so much doubt.

But as these three excellent books illustrate, the global transformations that are taking place in Asian geopolitics and economics, and their impact on America's place in the world, go well beyond a reaction to the many missteps of the Bush administration. At the heart of these transformations are the rise of Asia — the inexorable flow of economic influence from West to East — and the end of the Cold War following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s. The economic successes of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia have been joined by the rise of China and India. Even Vietnam is emerging as a potent, if still nascent economic force.

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And yet, the entire political, security and economic architecture that was put in place after World War II, largely under American leadership, has hardly changed to meet the new challenges. From the United Nations, dominated by a Security Council whose permanent members reflect an archaic world order, to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, the global institutions that helped shepherd development in the post-war world have yet to take fully into account the implications of Asia’s rise. In addition, America’s security alliances and economic relationships in Asia are under pressure to adapt to the new regional realities.

What these three books have in common is a sense that the dramatic changes that are transforming Asia and the world have created, in the words of Kishore Mahbubani, a “remarkably plastic moment in world history.” How the future world order is shaped, particularly with regard to Asia, could spell the difference between a continuing era of peace and economic prosperity and a new era of conflict and chaos.

Mahbubani’s *The New Asian Hemisphere* is by far the most personal and accessible of these three books, and the one most driven by frustration, and at times outrage, at what he sees as the West’s failure to provide a place at the global leadership table for Asia’s growing power. Mahbubani, a former diplomat who served as Singapore’s ambassador to the United Nations, is well known for his eloquent, if sometimes un-diplomatic, candor. He is blunt about what he

sees as the West’s refusal to cede control over global institutions such as the IMF or the UN Security Council, and argues that a backlash from the rest of the world, especially from Asia, is building. “We have entered the turbulent era of de-Westernization,” he argues.

“So far, the West has refused either to admit its domination of the world or to contemplate sharing power in a new world order,” he writes. “This is a prescription for eventual disaster.” The time has come for the 900 million people in the West to begin to listen to the 5.6 billion people in the rest of the world, he writes.

The irony is that Mahbubani’s anguished critique of America and Europe isn’t fundamentally either anti-Western or anti-American. On the contrary, he argues that what he calls “the Asian March to Modernity” is essentially based on Western values — free-market economies, science and technology, meritocracy, pragmatism, a commitment to peace, the rule of law, and excellent education.

So why isn’t the West celebrating the triumph of Western values in Asia? Mahbubani argues that it is because Asia’s growing economic power, particularly as reflected in the rise of China, is perceived in the West as a threat to Western control. This, in turn, is rooted in a historical sense of superiority toward Asia and the rest of the world. Even America, which has always been a more open society than Europe, is afflicted by this view, Mahbubani writes. “A curious mix of moral self-righteousness and strong desire to exercise control drives American foreign policy,” he says.

Is the West superior? Mahhubani answers with a scathing catalogue of Western policy blunders, political miscalculations and inept decisions in a chapter entitled, “Western Incompetence. Asian Competence?” From the Middle East to world trade talks, global warming, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and dealings with Iran, he blasts what he describes as Western incompetence and hypocrisy in managing world affairs. He is especially withering in his criticisms of the European Union. As for the quintessential Western rich man’s club, the Group of Seven industrial countries (which, does, though, include Japan), Mahhubani retorts, “Any objective audit of the G-7 process will show that it has effectively done nothing to improve the state of the world.”

Mahhubani charts three scenarios for the future. The first is one where the Asian March to Modernity continues, and even spreads to the Muslim world, and is eventually accommodated by the West. The second is one where the West, led by Europe, retreats into a fortress mentality in the face of Asia’s rise, spelling an end to globalization, as we know it. The third scenario is one where the West itself triumphs and succeeds in westernizing the world. Ever the optimist and devoted Asian, Mahhubani sees the first scenario as the most likely, and the third the least likely.

The New Asian Hemisphere is a passionate book, built upon the author’s lifetime engagement between East and West. If it seems at times a bitter work, it is the bitterness of disappointed idealism. He says explicitly that he is addressing a wake-up call to the West. “The simplest way of describing how this book is different from Western discourse is that it points out how the West is both a large part of the solution and a large part of the problem in our efforts to restructure the world order.”

Focus on Northeast Asia

The essays collected in *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order*, edited by G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon, represent perhaps the most comprehensive and varied analysis available in a single volume on the possible scenarios that lie ahead as the US and countries within this region seek to reshape the regional order. Ikenberry (editorial board member of *Global Asia*) and Moon (editor-in-chief of *Global Asia*), leading political scientists at Princeton University and Yonsei University, respectively, have assembled some 15 academics, mostly Asian, to assess the key issues underlying the current debate.

While this is primarily an academic book — written with all of the analytical and empirical strengths of such literature, but also with many of the cumbersome structural, linguistic and stylistic limitations of such academic writing — it merits close reading by serious policymakers and others interested in a possible framework for a new order in Northeast Asia. This ignores, of course, the perhaps even greater need to build a consensus on a new regional order

among a wider population in the countries involved — which would argue for an even more accessible language of discourse than academic writing provides.

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whether the rise of China will threaten to upset the regional order currently dominated by the US. In academic terms, this question is framed as one between “power-transition theory” and “institutionalist theory” — with the former arguing that conflict is most likely while the latter envisions an opportunity for international cooperation. This volume also explores a number of other fascinating topics, including the widespread perception that North Korea behaves irrationally.

Yongho Kim, an associate professor at Yonsei University and associate director of the university’s Institute for Korean Unification Studies, argues in a riveting essay that North Korea’s rogue behavior is, in fact, perfectly rational. Similarly, Katherine H.S. Moon’s essay on the nature of so-called anti-Americanism sheds valuable light on the relationship between the deepening of democracy in Asia and behavior that is too easily seen by outside observers simply as anti-Americanism. Moon, chair of the department of political science at Wellesley College, makes a cogent argument that these sentiments represent a triumph of democratic sentiment in these countries — never mind that the target of discontent might be America.

Some of the most valuable essays in this collection, as in Overholt’s book, look at the dynamics of change in the major countries of the region, and how they might influence an evolving regional order. China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and North Korea are each undergoing transformations that will contribute to the choices available for a new regional order. There are risks and opportunities, these essays argue, in the spectrum of choices available to all of the players — small and large — and the outcome could bring peace and stability, or conflict and much worse.

If Mahbubani's work is the voice of an Asian cajoling the West to listen to the rest of the world, William H. Overholt's *Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics* is the voice of an American deeply knowledgeable about this region attempting to explain the new Asian realities to Americans — especially to American policymakers. Overholt is director of the RAND Corporation's Center for Asia Pacific Policy and has spent more than three decades in the region. His is a brilliant work, polemical throughout (“there is something in the pages that follow that will upset virtually everyone,” he writes) and buttressed by rich historical and personal understanding of Asia.

The core of Overholt's thesis is that American foreign policy, and the domestic constituencies that underpin it, are trapped in Cold War structures and models of thinking that don't correspond to the new realities. A failure to recognize this is partly what is propelling the US into a closer military alliance with Japan that is out of step with China's emerging importance to the US both economically and geopolitically. “Historical experience shows that when a foreign-policy era ends, the institutions, mindset, and interest groups that characterized the old era tend to persist into the new era, with inertia that often endures far longer than the institutions' utility,” Overholt writes.

He argues that Bush administration foreign policy, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001, took a wrong turn by focusing almost exclusively on military and security relationships with other countries at the expense of economic relationships, and social development agendas, that ultimately deepen American influence and prestige in the world. Overholt is also critical of the Bush administration's policy of promoting democracy, arguing that it is being pursued without the necessary commitment to

economic development in the countries where it seeks to promote democracy. Asia's experience shows that strong democracies (such as those in South Korea and Taiwan) can only emerge in developing countries after successful economic development, even if that occurs, as it did in these two countries, under authoritarian political systems. Where democracy exists in countries without sufficient economic development, as in the Philippines, its foundations are weak.

He builds his argument by providing a sweeping and detailed portrait of American foreign policy after World War II, where US defense commitments were solidly coupled with policies that sought to promote economic and social development in allied countries — whether through the Marshall Plan in Europe or the approach in Asia of deliberately assisting and enabling economic take-off in Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia.

At the heart of this book, and some of its most compelling material, is a comprehensive country-by-country analysis of the current state of change in China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Southeast Asia. The material on India, Pakistan, and Russia is more perfunctory, but taken together these chapters paint a portrait of an Asia whose economic and political transformations appear to be occurring outside the full understanding of American foreign policymakers.

Understandably, China occupies a central place in Overholt's argument. His earlier book, *The Rise of China* (1993), was a remarkably prescient study that still stands as one of the great early works on China's emergence. In this book, Overholt goes to some lengths to counter the “offensive realist” school of political science — embodied by the political theorist John Mearsheimer — that argues the emergence of

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a new regional power, in this case China, will eventually threaten the current regional hegemon, the US, and lead to conflict. Overholt discredits the theory, and argues that conflict between the US and China isn't inevitable. Indeed, he argues that many of Asia's regional problems are now being managed jointly by the US and China. This is not to say that the US-China relationship could not be derailed by miscalculations on either side related to Taiwan, or by the US's insistence that Japan take on a greater military role in the region — something that is viewed with hostility not only by China, but by South Korea and much of the rest of Asia.

Overholt concludes this remarkable book with a series of scenarios for the future that alone justify reading the book. In a nutshell, they capture how “remarkably plastic” this moment in history is, particularly in Asia, and how the changes the region has undergone lay the foundations for both continued prosperity and possible chaos. “Change is coming,” he writes. “The forms that change may take will be determined not by mechanistic forces of history, but rather by leaders' decisions.”