

Book Review:
Has China Won? The Challenge to American Primacy by Kishore Mahbubani
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The book outlines key questions that the US and China should consider in developing a long-term strategy to understand the importance of envisaging a synergistic relation as against the uninformed impulse to outcompete one another. The author provides that although the competition between the US and China is both inevitable and avoidable, the emphasis of the book lies in deciphering certain key issues for the US vis-à-vis China and the vice versa to underline the core issues for a long-term US-China relation.

The ten questions raised to the US as against China are as follows: 1) China will overtake the US as a dominant economic power, how should the US respond?; 2) the US's primary goal should be to improve the livelihood of its own citizens or become a dominant player in the international system?; 3) is it wise for the US to continue investing in defense budget and foreign wars instead of directing investments into social services and national infrastructure?; 4) how will the US build international alliances to counterbalance China?; 5) how can the US ensure the relevance of US dollar as an economic weapon indispensable to global trade and financial transactions, as a global public good enabling an interdependent economy?; 6) how will the US ensure promotion of its soft power in international relations, when it withdraws from Human Rights obligations, Paris Climate Change agreement etc.?; 7) is the US able to intelligently develop analytical frameworks to capture the essence of competition with China?; 8) are the US's worries over China's rise driven by reason or impulsive fear of the other?; 9) is the US making a fundamental error of perception when it views the CCP as Chinese Communist Party – emphasising on 'Communism' than 'Chinese Civilization'?; and 10) Chinese chess is different from the Western chess, the former provides for the players to emphasise on a long-term strategy whereby one patiently builds up assets to tip the balance in one's favour while in the latter it is to quickly attack the king. Thus, the Chinese tend to emphasise on long-term strategy than the short-term wins. Is China aiming for a long-term strategy to tilt the balance in its favour?

Similarly, the author in a fictional memo to the Chinese President outlines the strengths of the US which makes it superior to China: a) Democracy in its various forms enables the people to take ownership of the state of affairs is seen as chaos in China but it is the foremost strength of the US as such a sense of ownership gives tremendous sense of individual empowerment at a cost of social harmony, whereas Chinese tend to prioritise social harmony at the cost of individual empowerment. The individual empowerment in the US culture has given birth to power personalities and minds with strong sense of

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purpose which is not easily achievable in the Chinese society; b) unlike China, the US has readily welcomed brightest foreign minds into their society and economy as many of the leading corporations have foreign CEOs, e.g., Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google; Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft; or Andy Grove, CEO of Intel. No foreign individual has headed a Chinese corporation; c) the US society promotes and enables strong institutional capacity to protect and develop its society, by having checks and balances within the Constitution among the three main institutions in the US. Institutional trust provides the US with various advantages like a truly global currency; d) the US is the world leader in excellent educational institutions and is an intellectual hub of many Nobel Laureates in light of a culture which promotes creativity, innovation and debate.

In Chapter 2, titled 'China's Biggest Strategic Mistake', the author outlines that China's biggest strategic mistake was to alienate several major constituencies, especially the US businesses without realizing its long-term consequences. This is the reason that the US-China trade war as announced by President Trump was not cohesively opposed by major sectors of the US economy when compared to the 1990s when President Clinton's de-linking of China's human rights commitments to MFN was driven and lobbied by key US corporations. This alienation of the US constituencies was due to three factors: a) Chinese states and provinces dealt with the US constituencies in an unfavourable manner in many areas, from honouring legal contracts to technology theft at scale; b) a tone of arrogance against the West after the 2008 financial crisis; c) relatively weak Chinese central leadership in 2000s.

In Chapter 3, titled 'America's Biggest Strategic Mistake', the author provides that the lack of a long-term strategy by the US in dealing with China is the biggest strategic mistake. China is unlike the Soviet Union in its strategy and demeanour. Unilateralism and uncoordinated actions instead of strategic alliance to regulate economic relations with China; withdrawal from the TPP agreement; erosion of trust in the state institutions which is detrimental to the viability of the US dollar; or acting against allies in dealing with Iran by imposing international sanctions thereby giving rise to an alternative 'digital' currency to promote trade with Iran in light of Chinese exploration of the digital currency markets in the near future to set up an alternative unit of measuring value through blockchain technology are the factors that hint at a lack of cogent and cohesive long-term strategy on behalf of the US to develop relations with China.

In Chapter 4, titled 'Is China expansionist?', the author provides that in contrast to the US, the Chinese culture has revered scholars more than soldiers, a greater reverence for a man who is skilled in both. Further, China unlike the US does not believe that it has a universal mission to promote Chinese civilization and encourage everyone else in humanity to emulate it. They believe that every culture, values and aesthetics have their own space. The author provides that Taiwan is a sensitive issue for China as nearly all historical vestiges of the Opium War 1949 has been removed or resolved including Hong Kong and Macao, but one remains – Taiwan. The West has not kept its promises on many issues, especially post-9/11 where even the self-imposed restraints seem to have disappeared, so China is rationally reluctant to trust decision-making by the West on key issues. The author provides that if the

US wishes to promote a sustainable democracy in Taiwan then it should leave Taiwan alone as China confronts two major constraints to unilaterally invade Taiwan: a) Taiwan Relations Act, 1979 whereby the US has committed to resist any form of coercion that would jeopardise the security, or the social or economic system of Taiwan and b) it is in the China's national interest to allow the continuation of a social and political laboratory to indicate how a Chinese society functions under a different political system. There is a convergence of Chinese and US interests in this case if political wisdom rather than short-term tactical games dominates Chinese and the US decision-making on Taiwan. Similarly, on the issue of South China Sea, the best way is to deescalate from both the US and China, but the US missed the chance when Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the same to the US. In conclusion, 2000 years of Chinese history has created a strategic culture which advises China against fighting unnecessary wars in the distant places. It provides that even though China's strategic weight and influence in the world will grow significantly, it will not behave as an aggressive and belligerent military power. Thus, the author asks whether it is wise for the US to focus on enhancing military capabilities when the real contest will be in the non-military sphere, is it time for the US to change its strategic consensus on China?

In Chapter 5, titled 'Can America Make U-Turns?', the author provides that the US has not learned the lesson from history. Especially, from the Cold War period when the Soviet Union was unable to have a rational strategy in defense, internal policy-making and external diplomatic and economic relations vis-à-vis the US. As in the current geopolitical scenario, it seems that the US acts like the Soviet Union in terms of its relations with China. The US lacks a cogent national strategy to withstand China in rationalizing the balance between allocating budget finance towards defence versus research & development infrastructure. Further, the independent capacity of the US administration to empower sophisticated diplomatic personnel for the management of foreign relations is hampered due to lobbyist pressures on the elected representatives. Additionally, promotion of defense budgets is concurrent to unnecessary military interference by the US in complex regional conflicts without a long-term exit strategy. The author highlights that the group-think pressures in Washington powered by various think-tanks who are funded or supported by vested interests impedes policy-making flexibility of the US politicians to make compromises which is the cornerstone of any successful diplomacy abroad. The author cites Yuval Harari and Steven Pinker to negate Robert Kagan's assertion that without the US's active international leadership through physical presence in conflict zones, the world, especially the conflict zones will descent into a jungle rule, full of chaos and primitive savagery. In contrast, the humankind has broken the law of jungle, there is at last peace and not just an absence of war. For most states, there is no plausible scenario leading to a full-scale conflict within one year. The author concludes by noting that the US needs to counter five false assumptions against China: a) the US will inevitably win any geostrategic competition against China as it won against Germany and Japan in World War II and against the Soviet Union in the Cold War as the challenges are not of the same scale; b) China's political and economic system is unsustainable and will collapse as all the communist governments eventually fail while all democracies eventually succeed; the author provides that unlike the Soviet Union, the US is not competing with another similar communist state, as the Chinese leaders

are more concerned with reviving and sustaining Chinese civilization than promoting communism around the world; c) the US has abundant resources and need not make any fundamental strategic adjustments or sacrifices in competition with China, it is false, because on a per capita basis, the US has far more resources than China, however, unlike geopolitical contests of the past, the future geopolitical contests will not be determined by physical resources, they will be determined by intellectual resources, especially resources resulting from investments in R&D; d) the US has a fundamentally just and well-ordered society resting on the wise US Constitution and rule of law therefore no fundamental re-structuring of the US society is required. The author provides that this assumption is false because the US has gradually become a class-stratified society, not the middle-class society that the US's founding fathers had worked to create as a reaction to the feudalism that the settlers had left behind in the EU. The regular presidential and congressional elections do not really take away the effective power of the ruling elites in the US; e) given the choice between partnering with the 'beacon of freedom, the shining city on the Hill', which is the US, or with a Communist party dictatorship - the majority of the humanity will naturally gravitate towards partnering with the US. The author provides that such was the case prior to the Cold War, however, currently the US does not seem to exercise strategic discipline and its material as well as moral capacity to inspire the rest of the world is under strain. The author concludes chapter 5 on a sombre note that despite the traditions of open debate in the US, it will be rare to note a broad-minded discussion on a case scenario where the US becomes number two behind China.

In Chapter 6, titled 'Should China Become Democratic?', the author provides that the Chinese fear chaos and favour social harmony over individual empowerment or democracy. Chinese do not compare their status quo with other countries as much as they compare their past to the present in terms of social harmony, well-being and individual capacity of Chinese citizens to uplift themselves. The author provides that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provides three public goods; a) it rein the strong nationalist impulses while strategically promote globalization with Chinese characteristics; b) the CCP under Xi Jinping is delivering to be a rational actor in responding to pressing global and long-term challenges; c) China is emerging as a status quo than a revolutionary power, thus reigning in imperialistic impulses to unwarily invade foreign territories or interfere in the affairs of other sovereign nations while dealing with national protests in a restrained manner. The reason why Chinese political system is resilient is because they appoint the most intelligent individuals who in turn ensure high-level of trust from the Chinese citizens as to their decisions. The author concludes that it is not necessary for China to abruptly convert into a democratic regime as such changes are met with many challenges, rather the way CCP has become flexible owing to the currents of Globalization within China, it is rational to gradually pace towards a more open society as the Chinese citizens, especially the expanding Chinese middle-class together demand for more freedoms and rights in the future. The absolute control of the CCP cannot last forever.

In Chapter 7, titled 'The Assumption of Virtue', the author deconstructs the 'assumption of virtue' as created by the US owing to the fact that their Constitution ensures a democratic, liberal nation as

compared to China. The false assumption of 'American Exceptionalism' creates a mental block for the US citizens to appreciate other values, culture or political system which may be quite different from their own. The false assumption of an exceptional quality of life within the US is also not true owing to the fact of rising income inequality and wealth gaps within the US. The author cited John Rawls to provide that the test he formulated as to how societies should measure their success in delivering social justice – *'the higher expectations of those better situated are 'just' if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of the society'*. In short, the least advantaged individuals of a given society are the benchmark as to the overall improvement of the society's well-being. The data provides that the US has not done well in this regard. The author reasons that this is due to the fact that under the surface presumption of a functioning democracy with all the rituals of voting, the US has become a society run by a moneyed aristocracy that uses money to make major political and social decisions. John Rawls warned that if in a society, with those with greater private means are allowed to control the course of public debate, the US democracy would be subverted. The author cites *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) US Supreme Court judgment which overturned many of the legislative restraints on the use of private financing of election campaigns that enabled vested corporate institutions to subvert democratic debate and citizen participation, making the US a 'plutocracy'. Succinctly, the author concludes that if the contest between the US and China is a contest between a healthy & flexible democratic and rigid & inflexible communist party system, then the US will prevail. However, if it is a contest between a rigid & inflexible plutocracy and a supple & flexible meritocratic policy system, China will prevail.

In Chapter 8, titled 'How will other countries choose?', the author outlines the geopolitical and economic rationales for key allies of the US and China to side one over the other, however, the author concludes that alliances will be based on reason over emotion. The complexity of ascertaining geopolitical or economic scenarios and priorities will be undertaken by all the allies of both the US and China, so there needs a sophisticated long-term strategy and patience for constructing and working in alliances through cooperation.

In Chapter 9, titled 'A Paradoxical Conclusion', the author concludes that a geopolitical and economic contest between China and the US is both inevitable and avoidable. He emphasises that rational and long-term strategy will enable both to avoid an unnecessary clash where convergence of interests through long-term strategy can be supported. In order to promote the convergence of interest, a dualistic point of view needs to be appreciated. There is no contradiction between the US and China, they both wish to improve the well-being of their citizens. The US is in need of new infrastructure where China is the key infrastructure-building powerhouse, similarly they will inevitably find various areas of cooperation than competition through long-term strategies than short-term impulsive tensions. No other issue than 'Climate Change' provides a platform for a truly global cooperative action where the US and China should play a leadership role through convergence of interests. The author provides that there is no contradiction in ideology and civilization or cultural aspects, differences in such should be noted as facet of diversity. No state can or should try to export their political views or values to another sovereign

state as this becomes the focal point of contradiction than actually exists otherwise. The Chinese leaders are political realists when compared to the US, still there is enough space in the world for both China and the US to thrive together.