



“Has the West Lost It? A Provocation”: A Comment in Regard to the End of Western Dominance (Book Review)

Emil Heršak & Tibor Komar

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, CROATIA

Received: 2 March 2020 ▪ Accepted: 20 April 2020 ▪ Published Online: 3 August 2020

1. Book review

The book under the above title was published by Kishore Mahbubani (1948–) last year. Mahbubani was born in Singapore and was originally from the Sindh Indian people, who arrived in Southeast Asia in a small number, perhaps under the influence of Western colonists (considering that Britain had already occupied India in the 19th century. Otherwise, this author was Singapore’s representative to the United Nations in 1984-1989 and 1998-2004, and was also a representative of the UN Security Council from 2001-2002. These factors are certainly very important when considering the contents of the book.

The title of this book can be translated literally from English into Croatian: “Je li Zapad izgubio?”, though it would be convenient to expand: “Will the West lose its dominance [in the world]?” And it should be added (in small letters) that commentary “provocation”, even though the author was not critical toward the West, and in fact at the very end of the paper he wrote that this was essentially a “gift to the West” ... because he clearly wants the West to settle normally, because it would be a great tragedy if the West triggered turbulence (unrest) and obviously other negative factors (pp. 90-91).

Mostly the text points out that the West has become the most dominant in the world over the last two centuries, and if there were no two world wars in the 20th century then the West could be dominant still “for many centuries” (p. 20). However, it would be convenient if the author defined the term “West” at the beginning of the work, because in all likelihood it only applies to the US, Great Britain, probably some Western countries in Europe (but not Eastern, not Russia), and probably Canada and Australia (though Australia is not located in the West). So, it would actually be convenient first briefly to define what the “West” is. And, for the rest of the area the author uses the term “Rest”, which would mean the rest of the world. But when the book is read, it becomes enough clearly the center of the West is essentially the US, Great Britain – and the countries that first joined the EU, while that “rest” mainly is Asia, Africa, South (so-called “Latin”) America and also Russia. And we can think where would be our Croatia before it liberated itself from the former Yugoslavia and subsequently joined the EU.

The author’s main thesis is that the West no longer has a dominant role in the world, and that this decline is in the upper hand authorities formed after the end of the Cold War. But the West continued to encourage some conflicts and wars, while other countries were increasingly developing. Supposedly, China, India and even Indonesia will soon become major and the most important countries in the world, especially through the economy and the fact that their rulers are increasingly being strive to improve status of their citizens. Mahbubani also presented in the text

some accounts of the world economy development... where one map emphasizes that China will have the largest share around 2022 (p. 12), and in one another map is that China and India will have the largest share of GDP till 2050 (p. 25). Besides, the author pointed out that one inconvenient event in China, i.e. the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis in Beijing, did not had such a negative impact on the country as the West thought... and there was no shock crisis in that because former President Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) had already promoted the positive status of the Chinese citizens. But the author thinks the event influenced the West to become “blind” to the further development of China ... and certainly other “non-Western” countries (p. 42). What seems problematic in this section of the book is the author's idealization of GDP as the sole measure for a country's development, and the claim that development brings a better education for all, a longer life span, reducing crime rates, eradicating poverty and generally bringing happiness. As it is well known, contemporary research from the perspectives of anthropology of globalization and anthropology of development warns that increased consumption around the world, unsustainable growth of emerging economies and even the global trend of tourism expansion (p. 35) contribute to destabilization of world economies, increase of climate (and others) refugees, corruption and increased domestic and international conflicts. Also, citing the examples of Pakistan and Bangladesh as excellent examples of growing economies, the enormous poverty problems these countries are struggling with are again ignored here.

Regarding the basic development of the West, Mahbubani has repeatedly mentioned the violence that is the West done more recently and – according to him – that breakup of Western domination, began after the end of the Cold War. And a negative occurrence, he noted, was NATO's expansion towards the European border along Russia, after communism had already been abolished in Russia. But based on various reviews, it is very clear if the author felt that the West should end conflicts and even attacks against other countries, and even Europe would have to establish “peace with Putin” (p. 67), and peace is essentially key positive dimension for the future, and that the West must follow. And in the world, supposedly, violence is becoming less and less... and people not only on the West are living longer ... and – according to the thesis – as early as 2030, half the world's people will have a middle class life status ... which is striking.

But as far as violence is concerned, the author particularly emphasized the very embarrassing war that the US launched in 2003 against Iraq, and they certainly wrongly linked the leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, with a strike to some buildings in the US, on 11 September 2001. The author also points out that the West had a negative relationship also in regard to Islam, even though this religion is (supposedly) evolving in the world. Even Europe (probably the EU) had instability towards the development of Islam worldwide.

However, as far as the positive elements of prehistory are concerned, the author said that the West also encouraged some key ideas around the world... and it can be concluded that phenomena such as cell phones, etc., have been interesting consequences throughout the world, also outside the West. The largest share of cell phones in the world is reportedly in the India, where 220 million people use these devices, while even the Southeast Asian country, Malaysia, has very large number of cell phones, and therefore ranked 9th in the world in that number. That would be Western influence ... but in essence the expansion of the cell phones had a greater advantage in the areas where due to the wide bands and hills, etc., it was much harder to build wire telephone infrastructure. The author did not necessarily mention this, although we believe that the spread of cell phones had interesting incentives both in the West and around the world, though Mahbubani added the detail that the Internet rapidly expanded in Malaysia, from 21.4% to 68.6% (p. 29).

In this book, the author also highlighted the positive ideas and educational supplements that the wider world has received from the West, and also the influence of Western educations around the world. But that and some other comments would be described very briefly now.

First, as far as expanding education from the West is concerned, it probably related mainly to the success of the United States. However, we should probably add a description presented by Bill Clinton, who believed that children's education in the US was not the most successful in the world, but is the best in some other Western countries (for that description see text: Bill Clinton, *Back to Work*, Zagreb: Mate, 2012). Mahbubani also wrote that the West was solving the problems of Asia, which had problems from the flood, etc. (p. 11). But there is one very opposite factor. According to an important BBC documentary, people in India could usually handle problems when floods erupted, but when Britain conquered that country and imposed an external capitalist model ... it triggered a loss of food from local people ... and reportedly 1880 – as many as 30 million Indians have starved to death (see BBC FOUR, *Racism. A History*. Editors: Tim Robinson and Marx Corrance, 2007). The BBC documentary also pointed out that a racist vision had arisen from the West in relation to other nations, and we can add that this may be related to some so-called the “eugenic” incentives that originated first in Great Britain – and therefore have been very extensively encouraged in the US, Germany and some other areas. And I can add that this eugenics had an impact on immigration to the United States... and because of that vision, because of a supposedly “less sense”, the US reduced the number of immigrants from Slavic eastern countries in 1924... and from Croatia. And quite contrary, some analyzes have confirmed that the smartest immigrant to arrive in the US was our Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), and we know that he wanted to make sure that all people could get electricity for free... but American scientist Thomas Edison (1847-1931), in essence – because of the impetus of capitalism, was significantly against Tesla's desire. Mahbubani claimed in his work that technologies, and even electricity, etc., going through capitalism (p. 11), and that would probably mean that it was also an intellectual impetus... but we just brought up that Tesla example. And of course Edison, who focused on capitalism, also raised other important subjects besides electricity... and for example electric bulbs – but still, he was not the first to invent those bulbs (the first examples were made in Britain and Russia, and not in the US). When referring to education, Mahbubani in several places in the book mentions the US as “the best educated society on Earth” (p. 52), which is a very interesting statement and in fact quite inaccurate in the context of any independent measurement where, for example, according to the 2017 PISA tests, the US holds an unprecedented 38th place in mathematics, and very similarly ranked in other areas.¹ He also portrays the term "reasoning" as an invention of the West, while neglecting centuries of Eastern philosophy or Islamic medicine and science, so it turns out that the whole world was just waiting for input from the West to begin thinking. What definitely obvious when reading a book are the numerous generalizations the author resorts to and which have no scientific basis – e.g. his idea of more and more Muslims becoming more religious actually contradicts recent data in support of societies becoming less religious, both in the West and the East (the example of Turkey is interesting because it shows a slightly increased number of believers, but also a considerable decline in their religiosity).²

Another additional detail may be interesting. Specifically, the author mentioned and described today Prime Minister of India, by the name of Narendra Modi, and was reportedly frequently criticized in the West, allegedly for right-wing nationalism, although it received support from Muslims (p. 17). However, it was not mentioned that in the text is another interesting feature, i.e. Modi avoided using English in international role³. And this actually has another key dimension that the author is a little different from described at the end of his paper. What is also striking is the praise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chinese President Xi Jin Ping, and Indonesian President Joko Widod in the economic directions they lead their countries, which again

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/15/u-s-students-internationally-math-science/>.

² <https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/en/HayatTarlari2018/#7thPage/1>.

³ Short description via Twitter, at <https://twitter.com/sampattoshniwal/status/506763508608802816>.

emphasizes purely economic social aspects, without taking into account other perspectives and the eventual consequences thereof.

The West must certainly get to know and respect the rest of the world, and learn about various other cultures, and has to allow equality of other peoples and ends military domination. And learning many other languages, whatever could be easily handled by computer, if the English would be replaced everywhere, then it would be very positive for our world development. And after all, we often mention one comment made by Gene Roddenberry (1921-1991), the man who started *Star Trek*, i.e. we must know and respect all the differences in the world, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to go into space at all. And that would probably be in line with the theses of the author Mahbubani. And he said Bill Clinton also argued that Americans need to adjust that they must not be “number one” (p. 81). However, as for today's US President Donald Trump, Mahbubani has concluded that Trump is not the best president, because he “doesn't even know about the world” (p. 87)! But still, if we read a Trump book a few years ago translated into Croatian, we can find one key review against illegal American war in Iraq (see Donald Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix our Crippled America*. Zagreb: Mate, 2016).⁴

But there is another weird detail that the author has outlined. In particular, he claimed that period 1990-2020 was the best phase in human history (p. 28). Certainly, it was also the end of the Cold War, and further development of the world would be great ... if all peoples respected others (and I may add that except Roddenberry also Pope Francis today had a similar view). Admittedly, that period after 1990 also led to war in our Croatia and B&H, which cannot be described as positive.

And we can add another author's focus. In particular, he mentioned the famous author Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) several times (he also presented one of his descriptions at the beginning of his book). And emphasize that Machiavelli had thesis that the leader must take care of charity (p. 8), which is likely percussive. But he also said that many people in the West considered Machiavelli to be “the embodiment of evil” (p. 8), because it is essentially poorly understood, although the West needs to understand what Machiavelli had claimed (p. 63). But here there is one known detail that the author did not mention, i.e. may added in a comment. Machiavelli's work on the rule is not quite accurately translated into English. It is one well-known translation *lapsus*, and for an accurate understanding it is necessary to avoid English translation of this known work.⁵

Mahbubani's book is relatively short ... only 91 pages of text and 8 pages of notes and list page (index). If the text been a little larger, it might have covered some of the comments we made and mentioned in this review. But – regardless – we think this book should be translated (to our language) and post soon, because regardless some of comments ... the topic is crucial. Surely, the domination of one part of the world must be stopped ... and all different cultures and successes in the world should be respected.

⁴ Admittedly, he added, Hilary Clinton was in favor of this illegal war, so it could be interpreted as a detail from sources, because the main rival to Trump in presidential election was just her.

⁵ There is more confirmation that Machiavelli's translation in English is problematic, which leads to problems, although the Croatian translation from Italian is very accurate. Otherwise, in this regard, I added one note in the translation of the book: see Brendan Simms, *Europe. The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present*. Zagreb: Mate, 2016, p. 24. The English version used by Simms was completely inaccurate to the Italian, while in Croatian it was almost correct, and many other English authors do not realize that it was either a lapse or perhaps even a deliberately modified translation.

2. Notes

– A chapter from Machiavelli's work is before the first chapter is (iii).

(1) *A New Order of Things*

– A change in the history of 200 years Western domination; before, China and India were dominant (p. 3).

– The West has not triggered a world strategy, it has initiated wars ... Iraq, Syria, Russia's sanctions and criticism of China ... (7).

– The wrong interpretation of Machiavelli ... "Many in the West consider Machiavelli to be the embodiment of evil (8)" ... but according to M. the leader must first establish the goodness of others ...

– "Machiavelli advocated that a leader who makes himself 'responsible for the lives of others' must come first to put forth your charity." (8)

– World poverty is decreasing ... 1981 was 44% of poverty and now 2016 is 10% (10).

(2) *The Gift of Western Wisdom*

– The influence of Western "reasoning" ... the example that wanted *The Oxford English Dictionary* ... "adoption many new technologies, from modern medicine to electricity, from railways to cell phones ..." (11) but it still went over capitalism, and we know that Tesla had problems with Thomas Edison in the US, as for electricity, and so was the problem with light bulbs in the US ... it was rumored that Edison invented electric bulbs in the world, but this is NOT true ... those bulbs were invented in Britain (Joseph Swan from and even in Russia before that).

– The expression ... "The application of the scientific method has also provided solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems which Asians have had millennia, including floods and famines, pandemics and poverty." (11) ... but this is not exactly ... the West, specifically Britain when it took over India launched the killing of 30 million people! (see BBC FOUR: *Racism. A History*. Editors: Marx Corrance and Tim Robinson, 2007), and in that movie (at the end) writes that racism made the difference between the West and the rest.

– Western reasoning has reportedly encouraged non-Western societies in recent decades (12) ... but again there is the problem of capitalism ... an example is Tesla, but in general health problem from the US.

– China ... Deng Xiaoping tried to improvise everything in China (13) ...

– Burma (Myanmar) Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines have changed (14).

– First revolutions ... democracy ... western theorists of democracy ... Asian leaders now know they are responsible to their own people ... the author claims that this is a gift that the West has given Asia (14-15).

– The Second Revolution ... psychology (15).

– Third Revolution – Field of Government (16).

– [Narendra] Modi is often criticized in the West (17) ... he doesn't speak English in the world because the world has to learn English as your own language⁶; Modi is Muslim ... and profitable is a great support from Muslim countries ...

(3) *Suicidal Western Wars*

– The domination of the West could have continued for many centuries, if it had not been two world wars in the 20th century - this is generally marked by the author (v. 20).

– The author talks about the impact of Western education on the world (21) ... but Clinton (as an addition) pointed out in his book that the US is very negative about it! (See Bill Clinton, *Back to Work*. Mate: 2012, table on p. 99 and see his slightly wider descriptions). And problems also arose in Kenya when education was in English ...

⁶ <https://twitter.com/sampattoshniwal/status/506763508608802816>.

but when promoted from English to Swahili then it was more positive ... and clearly it would be positive too for Swahili to be learned in the West.

– Francis Fukuyama’s book about the end of history has been around since the end of the Cold War ... and that it will be Western liberal democracy to be the ultimate form of human government ... but China and India have awakened ... (21-22).

– The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident in China ... the West then thought that China would continue to be corrupt country, and did not take into account that former President Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) was already very positive developed China ... (22).

– The 9/11 2001 incident in the US ... and then the attack on Iraq ... “Unfortunately, most elites in the West are still with scornfully looks at all those who voted for Trump and Brexit. Hillary Clinton discovered that when described Trump supporters as a ‘basket of deplorables’” (23).

– Pakistan is one of the largest problem countries in the world (26) (and is pushed there by English); Bangladesh - a major increase in life from 45.83 in 1960 to 69.68 in 2010 (27).

– By 2030, over half of the world’s people will have middle class status ... (27)

– The author claims that the period 1990-2020 was the best in human history (28) ... but it was not in Croatia and in Iraq, although Croatian politicians today focus on the US (especially our former president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović who worked for NATO).

(4) *The Blindness of Western Elites*

– Internet penetration rates rose from 21.4% in 2000 to 68.6% in 2016 (29) a shift from English (and it can be seen as a shift from English) ... the proportion of adults who own cell phones, Malaysia ranks third in the world (29); it is used here. The term “smartphone” which is typically tricky etymologically, but we call it “cellphone”; but cell phones have expanded because of the fact that telephone wire infrastructure over some areas could not be made ... otherwise, in Croatia, cell phones appeared during the war because there were no links between the conflicting areas ...

- “... our planet is aggravated by the global dominance of the Western media, which dominates the global news and infect the world with the prevailing Western pessimism” (29).

– Thesis “the end of the West may lead to a new dark age”, but the author says it is true the opposite ... (30).

– Southeast Asia will be the fourth economic zone in the world by 2050 ... (31).

– I am critical of Nepal and Yemen ... (31).

– Europe was in shock when refugees started arriving from North Africa ... (33); it had to be described a little longer ... because the American strikes triggered it.

(5) *The Global Explosion of Travel*

– International tourism is a supreme luxury (35).

– George W. Bush said in 2006 that American people need to know that they live in a dangerous world ... (36)

– The West does not know that China is developing better than in all its last 3,000 years ... (36).

– India has the largest number of smartphones in the world; over 220 million users (37).

– Violence becomes less and less ... (37) and it must be reduced ... and then humanity will be better connected ... (38).

(6) *Why Hasn’t the West Noticed?*

– As for the West ... As George Orwell wrote, “To see what stands in front of one’s nose needs a constant fight [= constant struggle]” (39).

– The West reportedly lost its direction after the end of the Cold War, and now is influenced by “hubris” (in Croatian: oholost, arogancija) (39).

– Fukuyama badly influenced thoughts in the West (“brain damage to the West”) ... (39-40).

– According to the author, after the Second World War, the West continued to focus and lead the competition; and when the USSR made its way into space, the US was in shock ... so in 1969 that country sent humans to the moon (40).

(7) *Western Hubris*

– China developed independently of 1989 Tiananmen (Western Vision) (42).

– Asia had a financial crisis in 1997-8, but it has overcome ... (42).

– China became the world’s largest economy in 2014, though it was only 10% of the US in 1980 (43).

(8) *Strategic Errors: Islam, Russia and Meddling in World Affairs*

– The worst was the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 ... an inaccurate attack on Osama bin Laden ... though Saddam Hussein opposed bin Laden ... (44).

– It was a disaster (45); the author has criticized Trump several times, but did not mention that Trump told in one of his books that he was against this illegal Iraq war (see D. Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix our Crippled America*. Zagreb: Mate, 2016).

– Islam is perhaps the most evolving world (45).

– The West ... that modernization and economic development lead to less religion and greater secularity ... contrary to Islam (46); however, it is Protestantism in the West.

– “Another major strategic mistake of the West was to further humiliate already humiliated Russia” ... and NATO expansion! (47) As a result, Russia has elected Putin ... (48).

– Revolts after the Cold War: Yugoslavia in 2000 (Bulldozer, the so-called “excavator revolution” against Milošević); Georgia 2004 (Rose, “Roses”), Ukraine 2005 (Yellow), Iraq in 2005 (Purple), Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (Tulip), Tunisia in 2010 (Jasmine), and Egypt in 2011 (Lotus) (49-50); the author did not mention that war that is created after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and also after the Cold War ... and as for that “Revolution rose” in Georgia ... it was a political move towards the West and a distance from neighboring Russia ... and Eduard Shevardnadze (1928-2014) lost his presidency then, and replaced him by Mikhail Saakashvili, who wanted to liaise with NATO and started the war with Russia in 2008 (essentially the Russians gave their citizenship to the Ossetians in the so-called South Ossetia, to be in touch with North Ossetia in Russia, and that no matter what they lived in Georgia ... but the Georgian army later attacked that province of the South Ossetia, and this prompted Russian intervention).

– Gabriel García Márquez ... from 1824 to 1994 the United States made 73 invasions into Latin America ... (51).

– Donald Trump - his ignorance over time will be overcome from the wider community, by the well informed human communities ... (52)

– Trump separates the US from the policy of climate change (52) ... China and India will suffer most from climate change deterioration ... (53).

(9) *A New Strategy: Minimalist, Multilateral and Machiavellian*

– During civic work, the US launched al-Qaeda against the USSR and Afghanistan ... and this company is attacked a country that supported it on 11/09 2001 ... (World Trade Center) ... (55).

– Obama transferred ISIS warriors from Afghanistan to Syria against Assad ... The US stated that it was against ISIS ... (ISIS = Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) (56).

– ASEAN ... Alliance of Southeast Asian Nations: Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam / success in Myanmar ... (57).

– EU - zero-war move among the countries concerned ... (57); Nordic countries: economic growth and social harmony ... (58).

– The West needs to better understand the other part of the world (58).

– According to Paul Kennedy’s thesis from the Great Britain, it was alleged that President Truman launched in 1945 the global one Parliament through the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (58-59); since the author of this war also served at the UN, he knew how UNGA functioned ... (59).

– The first US invasion of Iraq by senior Bush was legal through the UN, and the second by the younger Bush was illegal (60).

– “Machiavelli is one of the most famous and least understood Western figures”. The West needs more to know from Machiavelli (63).

– The global power of the West is increasingly diminished ... but goes beyond autopilot... (64).

(10) *The West on Autopilot: Europe and America Do Not Face the Same Challenges*

– The strategic challenge for the US is not the same as for Europe ... (65); according to Merkel ... Europe has to take it alone his fate in hand ... (66); primarily NOT, and it is followed by conflict with Russia, so Europe needs to establish peace with Putin ... Europe’s biggest problem is instability towards the Islamic world ... (66).

– One of Obama’s greatest gifts to America was the nuclear deal with Iran (70).

– Clinton linked the security of states with the bombing of Syria, and Obama thought he should bombing Afghanistan and Pakistan ... and Trump bombing Syria, after a chemical attack Asasa (6 April 2017) (73).

– China will win in economic competitiveness because it has large populations, 1.37 billion, in proportion to 321 million in the US (74).

(11) *A More Dangerous World*

– The world will become more volatile if the West does not change its orientation (75).

– The West is wrong that democracy is necessary for economic success (76).

– Japan became the first non-western country with modern development, during the reign of Meiji 1860s ... (78); but it also led to a crisis (cf. the Japanese book *I’m a Cat*, which is written 1905-1906 by Natsume Sōseki [1867–1916], which mentions this psychological change that has caused Meiji).

– Huntington incorrectly pointed out that “Islam has bloody borders” ... (79).

– Trump - focus on military competition; he increased the number of the US warships from 272 to 352 ... (81).

– Bill Clinton suggested to Americans to adjust to a world where the US is not “number one” ... it was bravely from him (82).

– China will develop, but as Xi says, it will not seek to change the world ... (84).

(12) *A Better World - for Americans and Europeans*

– Western minds must know that for over 2 centuries they have been aggressive and interventionist ... (85).

– Trump (according to the author) clearly does not know about the world (= “... ignorant about the world”) (87).

– As Amitav Ghosh from Asia said ... so-called *New Yorker* magazine directs ideas toward traditional worldview (89).

– Liberalism promotes intellectual superiority to the rest of the world ... (89).

(13) *So - Has The West Lost It?*

- The West is coming to an end! It is not impossible that China will lead the world (90)
- This book is supposed to be a “gift to the West” - it described what the West did for the shell state, but it will be a great tragedy if the West is going to be the main driver of turbulence (turmoil/upheaval) and uncertainty in the moment of the greatest promise (oath) of mankind (91).

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests. The translation of the reviewed book by E. Heršak and T. Komar in Croatian can be expected soon (it will be published by Mate, Zagreb, Croatia).

