

Book Review

MAHBUBANI, K. (2013). THE GREAT CONVERGENCE: ASIA, THE WEST, AND THE LOGIC OF ONE WORLD. NEW YORK: PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

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Globalization is a fact of modern life and the growth of social media is increasingly shrinking the world in which we live. This book addresses some of the issues facing an increasingly connected world, adding to the literature on globalization. It starts with the assumption that the world is more interconnected than it has been in any other period of history and that this interdependence will only increase. Globalization is here to stay and therefore, according to Mahbubani, the world needs to create a unified one-world government. Although advocating for an international federation, he acknowledges that such a federation is not feasible in the near future and recommends intermediate steps to be taken by the international community in order to strengthen international organizations and begin the process of creating better global governance. But while the author provides several interesting solutions, many of these solutions are not only highly unrealistic but also contradictory.

As the world's economies become increasingly interdependent and communication technology allows immigrants or students to remain in touch with family in their country of origin, the world continues to shrink. As individuals interact, societies are increasingly picking the best norms and making nationals conform to these new norms, converging into a single global order. While many of these norms stem from Western ideals and the Enlightenment, Mahbubani goes a step further, arguing that Western ideals should be the foundation on which this new government is built. Accordingly, Mahbubani models the global order on logic and the scientific method, matching the idealistic rhetoric of free trade, democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. But although it is true that globalization is bringing the world closer together, his justification is weak. The first and strongest argument for this convergence is the shifting view of war (15). Global or total war is now seen as illegitimate; however, while the world seems interested in avoiding large-scale and costly wars, many countries still see force, or the use of force, as a means of securing their interests (the US included). In addition, according to the Genevadeclaration.org, "more than 740,000 people die each year as a result of violence associated with armed conflict."¹ As Mahbubani is writing to a Western audi-

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ence, he cites several statistics on the probability of being caught in a terrorist attack as being lower than a car accident or struck by lightning (16). But just because there is a low probability of death by terrorist attack does not make the world a less dangerous place. Low level internal conflicts are still being fought throughout the world in countries ranging from Syria to the Ukraine and to Israel-Gaza.

The primary cause of global convergence is the increasing integration of global economics. Writing after the 2008-09 financial crisis, much of the criticism centers around perceived failure to take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen current global institutions. The onset of the financial crisis, in Greece, showed how interdependent the international economies have become today. Mahhubani astutely points out that today's global economy is being run not by economists, but by businessmen and politicians (66-7). But as true as this might be, the current economy is not yet truly global, but highly integrated. The fact that there are 'global' forces which affect how businesses interact or pressure European politics to find solutions for the Eurozone doesn't mean that there is a global economy (66-8). The underwriting of this international economy is currently based on the US dollar, but instead of arguing strongly against a shift in how the economy is underwritten, Mahhubani argues for greater responsibility of American politicians and financial planners (69-72). While he discusses the efforts of the BRIC nations to decrease their reliance on the dollar, he does so to argue for a global economy. While none of the current governments have a currency that could be seen as truly capable of matching the dollar, this argument is no longer as outlandish as it was in the past.

The two primary global institutions discussed at length are the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations. Mahhubani uses the WHO as an example to demonstrate how the world is failing to address global convergence and in this instance, the increasing risk of a global pandemic. As proof, he argues that the percentage of regular budget funds given to the WHO is a decreasing percentage of the budget; however, he neglects to discuss how such resources have increased overall. He also argues that voluntary funding is not sufficient, but Mahhubani ignores how total funds available to the UN have mostly risen annually (99). His final argument contradicts his previous argument. While globalization increases interdependence, it also increases competition. Increased competition is often cited as one of the primary causes behind rising living standards in the developing world. In the medical world, as competition increases, prices decrease and more people can afford basic healthcare. This has allowed private organizations to supply needed vaccinations and medicines to the poorest of the poor. But instead of discussing these benefits, Mahhubani argues that the increased diversity and involvement of Western organizations is undermining the WHO.

The main reason that the global world cannot create a global convergence is the inherent double movement of the international community. "The 88 percent of the world's population who live outside the West [may] want to converge toward Western living standards and have the same kind of peaceful and prosperous lives that most Western citizens have enjoyed" (195), but even if this is universally true, the Western world is growing

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increasingly protectionist. As more countries develop, they also want a greater say in how the world is run; this is contrary to the self-interest of the current UN Security Council members. Although many critics of the UN argue to abolish the veto, Mahbubani points out that the veto is what keeps the Security Council members invested in the UN. The League of Nations did not have a veto system and dissolved because of it. The veto is good in principle, but has been misused in application. The solution he proposes is to adjust the Security Council. While his recommendation sounds great in theory and involves a fairly even divide of nations, his premise is flawed from the beginning. The greatest of these flaws is that in order for any changes to be made, England and France must be willing to forego their current positions in favor of a combined European seat. If the primary method of determining this seat becomes economic power, as is the reasoning of the 7th available seat going to India, then it would go to Germany and not France or England.²

To create a truly global governance system, Mahbubani argues that the world must “destroy clearly anachronistic policies of the Western world toward both the UN and the larger processes of multilateralism” (251). For the world to “encourage more global conversations” (248) would foster “the emergence of a ‘global ethic’” (255). This sounds great in practice, but there is no clear incentive for why current world leaders would voluntarily hand over power to another entity, especially one which they have no control over. The current system was created as a reaction to the destruction of two World Wars and under the shadow of a Cold War that had the potential to annihilate life on Earth. Barring some equally grave threat I cannot see any leader having the political will to even discuss the possibility of these changes. Overall, the book raises several interesting points, but the recommendations are highly impractical.

NOTES

¹ <http://map.genevadeclaration.org>, accessed 22 July 2014.

² <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.xls>, accessed 22 July 2014.

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