

REZENSIONEN

Kishore Mahbubani: Can Asians think?

Singapore/Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1998/1999, 190 p., 14 US\$

This is a collection of 13 essays and speeches originally published between 1992 and 1998. Usually readers are well advised to stay clear of republished volumes of essays with a silly title. With this book the advice is less clear cut.

Mahbubani, Singapore's Ambassador to the UN, half distances himself from the politically incorrect title (which earned me hostile stares when I read the book on the German railway system): Asians in his view have not been very thoughtful in the past, or else they would not have been colonized. Recently however, they have developed quite nicely, better perhaps than many of their erstwhile colonial masters. In sum then, as one cannot be sure that these sensible developments and the regional cooperation, which underpins it, will continue, they do think, well, perhaps maybe (pp.26-33).

The question then arises: Does Mr Mahbubani, posing like Rodin's "Le Penseur" on the cover, think? The answer is: Clearly yes, creatively, intelligently, assertively, emotionally, but certainly neither very structured nor consistent. He usually shoots from the hip. When he hits a target it appears deceptively brilliant. But when he misses with at least the same frequency, it looks decidedly less intelligent. Misguided predictions based on past intellectual fashions and fads are common in the opinion and commentary fraternity. But there are surely only few among them who republish their predictions, which have gone wrong since, half a decade later.

The recurrent theme of the essays is the Asia-Pacific age, led by the benevolent triumvirate of China, Japan and the U.S. (p.150). Europe and the rest of the world (including most of South and West Asia) play only a marginal role.

This may be familiar stuff, which seems to have outlived its shelf life as an intellectual fashion when the Japanese asset inflation bubble burst in 1992 and when the East Asian tigers began to limp in 1997.

Granted that Japan will never take over the U.S. as an economic power "in a decade or two" as he foresaw in 1992 (p.96). He observes later (1995) in Asia 'a tidal wave of common sense and confidence', which overcame all major historical squabbles, and created with APEC "a powerful institution" (no joking either) (p.135). He views South East Asia, a region rightly seen as more diverse than the Balkans, as "one of the most peaceful and prosperous corners of the world" (p.14), which probably is surprising news to most Filipinos and Indonesians. With their past modernizing dictatorships, Taiwan and Korea according to the author have inherited good governance, political stability, meritocratic bureaucracies, equitable economic growth and fiscal prudence (p.49). Again, most Koreans and Taiwanese today will probably disagree. Japan is praised for its high rates of capital investment (p.129). As most of

it was wasted into unproductive overcapacities, this virtue today constitutes the largest single threat to the pan Asian economy. Japan is also asserted to have "one of the most Europeanized courts in the world" (p.129). With a 99% confession based conviction rate, the author does not know either the Japanese legal system or the European one, or neither.

He goes on to praise modern information technologies, like satellite TVs, to have opened every society "with the exception of North Korea" (p.145). A curious statement for a Singaporean official since subversive tools like satellite TVs remain also banned in his aspiring information technopolis to this date. Yet for Mahbubani, the political and economic status quo in Asia appears as almost wonderful. It seems to serve everybody well, especially China as it develops (p.143). That Asia's emerging tripolar structure is essentially unstable and hence dangerous may have escaped his attention.

The U.S. are uniformly seen as a benign, if somewhat erratic and self-centered superpower. They undertook the Korean and Vietnam wars disturbing the otherwise peaceful Asian continent "in large part because of a perceived linkage to European security" (p.131). This perception surely has novelty value probably also to MacArthur and McNamara. We are also told "Americans carry no hubris from history as Europeans do" (p.130), and are assured, for good measure, that the bad European colonialists and current do-gooders are responsible for the "African catastrophe" (p.125). It comes at little surprise then that also the 2nd World War and the Cold War are seen as "essentially pan European struggles" (p.116). It is only curious then that the Chinese suffered by far the highest death toll in this pan European struggle. Contemporary Europe gets similarly low grades for its decline (no, it's not Japan!), due to its lacking fiscal discipline, evil social welfare and pork barrel public projects (p.86). It is vexing only to the author that this decrepit quarrelsome old continent has managed to set-up a more effective and durable regional integration than Asia was able to undertake so far (p.111).

This is all the more annoying since, according to the author, "the Asia-Pacific is used to diversity, but Europe is not" (p.124). Perhaps he might be well advised to spend some comparative weekends in metropolises like London, Berlin and Paris on the one hand, and in monoethnic Tokyo, Beijing and Bangkok on the other, and then calmly re-examine his sweeping assertion.

In all fairness, Mahbubani also points his finger at valid European weaknesses: Europe being strategically surrounded by an Islamic "ring of fire", stretching from North Africa, via the Balkans to the Caucasus (p.121) with "mass migration from 3rd world countries [...] seeping slowly through porous borders" (p.39): "Within a few decades when Western Europe will be confronted with teeming impoverished masses at its borders and when increasing numbers will be slipping in to join the millions already there" (p.43).

Yet the codes of "political correctness", which produced "moral cowardice" (p.72) and ideological blindness, have not only prevented proper strategic analysis and timely policy responses. They have also led to that sort of well-intentioned bigotry in a moralizing foreign policy, which in the author's view has become a particularly annoying European trademark. In his view the EU condemns the generals in Burma,

but cosies up to the generals in Algeria (p.123). Maybe, but the alternatives to the generals are strikingly different! The author earlier expands on the theme of western double standards to China, Kurdistan, Libya and Saudi Arabia (p.51 and p.73). Surely there is no shortage of double yardsticks between politically privileged nations like Russia and Israel, rich government controlled export markets like China and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and the have-nots, which enjoy the full thrust of moral indignation on the other. Mahbubani is equally right to question the naïve "liberal orthodoxy" (p.9) that "all societies would end up creating liberal democratic societies [...] as they moved up the socio-economic ladder" (p.24).

This volume contains a fair amount of light and shadow. Due to the multitude of judgements and their assertiveness the balance depends very much on the eye of the beholder.

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Mya Than, Carolyn L. Gates, eds. ASEAN Enlargement. Impacts and Implications

Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2001, 378 S., 32,90 US\$

Mya Than, ed. ASEAN Beyond the Regional Crisis. Challenges and Initiatives

Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2001, 304 S., 32,90 US\$

Spätestens seit dem nunmehr bereits fünf Jahre zurückliegenden Ausbruch der Asienkrise haben nicht wenige Kenner der Region die zunehmende Bedeutungslosigkeit und schwindende regionale Bedeutung der Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) beklagt. Und der Hinweis auf die mangelnde institutionelle Wandlungsbereitschaft und -fähigkeit der Organisation im Angesicht massiver internationaler Strukturänderungen zählt zu den journalistischen Standardthemen in Südostasien selbst und über die Region hinaus. Wie ist angesichts der angeblich fortschreitenden Marginalisierung der ASEAN das ungebrochene starke akademische Interesse an ihr zu erklären? Wie kommt es, dass seit 1997 mehr als 50 Monografien und Sammelbände mit "ASEAN" im Titel erschienen sind? Die Antwort auf diese Fragen scheint weniger im Kontext der konkreten politischen und ökonomischen Resultate inter-gouvernementaler Kooperation in Südostasien zu suchen zu sein, als vielmehr mit dem Umstand zusammenzuhängen, dass die ASEAN im Laufe ihres 35-jährigen Bestehens eine kaum noch überschaubare Anzahl begleitender wissenschaftlicher, so genannter "track two"-Aktivitäten hervorgebracht hat. ASEAN ist sozusagen zu einem akademischen Selbstläufer geworden, einem bedeutenden Forschungsmarkt, der sich als Resultat der Aktivitäten Dutzender Forschungsinstitute, mehrerer jährlicher Konferenzserien und regelmäßiger Workshops immer wieder seine eigene Nachfrage schafft. Gleichzeitig gilt ASEAN aufgrund der umfangreichen Sekundärliteratur weltweit als beliebtes Thema für Magisterarbeiten und Dissertationen, von denen nicht wenige anschließend wieder den internationalen Buchmarkt anreichern. Dies alles soll keinesfalls negativ bewertet werden –