



Why Asia Wins

Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, says Minxin Pei underestimates the significance of Asia's growth in "Think Again: Asia's Rise." Economic Strategy Institute President Clyde Prestowitz suggests authoritarian leadership helped drive the region's success.

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While I have great respect for Minxin Pei and his work, I disagree with most of his article ("Think Again: Asia's Rise," July/August 2009). It seems to suggest that the rise of Asia will not fundamentally change anything. Nothing could be further from the truth. Asia will demonstrate that the Western domination of world history over the last 200 years has been an aberration. With China and India moving once again to center stage, we will return to the historical norm in which these countries are the world's two largest economies, as they were for 1,800 years. It took extreme underperformance by the Chinese and Indian populations for them to fall behind, but that era is now over.

Pei suggests that Asia's rise could lead to divisions among Asian powers. This is quite possible and wouldn't be very surprising. But so far, the rise of Asia has been accompanied by diminishing rather than rising tensions between Asian powers. There is a remarkable degree of geopolitical calm in East Asia today. Pei's article makes no effort to explain this remarkable development. One cause is that the caliber of Asia's geopolitical thinkers is today superior to that of their Western counterparts.

The most dangerous aspect of Pei's article is that it will encourage complacency among U.S. thinkers. It seems to suggest that the United States can continue on autopilot and will always remain on top. This would be a disastrous course of action. The good news, as I explain in my book, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, is that the new Asian societies want to replicate, not dominate, the West. But they also expect the West, especially the United States, to share power and not hog it. Every society must adjust as the world changes. So too must America.

In short, Pei is correct that we should "think again" about Asia's rise, but the only reasonable conclusion is that it will change everything.

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Minxin Pei correctly notes that China, despite its growing importance, will not be dominant anytime soon if ever, either in the world or in Asia, and that a number of negative factors could slow or even halt the rise of Asia's developing countries.

But surely, anyone can see that the United States' relative power and influence in Asia has declined and will continue to decline. The loss of relative U.S. power is partly due to East Asia's pragmatic economic model, which flexibly mixes government and private resources and incentives. With its false, debt-driven growth subtracted, U.S. performance over the last 20 or 30 years is revealed as inferior to that of all Asian countries including Japan, with its much-mourned "lost decade."

It also seems indisputable that all of the fast growth in Asia outside India has taken place under authoritarian or, in the case of Japan, bureaucrat-dominated political systems. Indeed, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan all began to falter as their political systems became less authoritarian. It must be stated that in many democratic developing countries there is democracy fatigue, and the soft authoritarian approach of Singapore or even the more muscular Chinese model has appeal. It's no surprise that in Latin America, where the so-called "Washington Consensus" has produced very little growth, the only thing anyone wants to know is how China and India are doing it.

It may be comforting to believe that the U.S. political system will self-correct, but there is just as much reason to think that the United States will

not recover because of the increasing intractability of its politics, dominated as they are by powerful, well-financed interest groups.

So, yes, a little contrarianism might be in order regarding the inevitable rise and dominance of Asia, but please: not too much.

Clyde Prestowitz

President

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Minxin Pei replies:

I deeply appreciate the comments of Kishore Mahbubani and Clyde Prestowitz, both of whom have written bestsellers on Asia. But Mahbubani mischaracterizes my argument when he says that I imply nothing fundamental has been changed by Asia's rise. Although I reject the notion that Asia will be a dominant power, I emphasize that Asia's rise is real and will lead to a multipolar world.

As for the geopolitical calm observed by Mahbubani, appearances are deceiving. If Asian countries are indeed "calm," why is the region experiencing the world's fastest growth in military spending? Why do the Indians view the Chinese with distrust and fear? Why does Sino-Japanese animosity remain as entrenched as ever? The current calm might very well be the sort one sees before the storm.

Prestowitz is right that some East Asian countries experienced their fastest growth under authoritarian rule. But he neglects the fact that other Asian autocracies -- such as Burma and North Korea -- have scored miserably on growth. It's tempting to prescribe a little authoritarianism to spur development, but there is no guarantee that it won't quickly become too much. It often does.

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