

February 15, 2013 5:08 pm

The rule of more



By Philip Stephens

As the east rises and all states lose influence, leaders will increasingly have to share power



Philippine president Benigno Aquino III, Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, Thailand PM Yingluck Shinawatra, Vietnam's PM Nguyen Tan Dung, US president Barack Obama, Cambodia's PM Hun Sen, join hands for a summit group photo in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World, by Kishore Mahbubani, *PublicAffairs*, RRP£17.99/\$26.99, 328 pages

The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn't What It Used to Be, by Moisés Naím, *Basic Books*, RRP£18.99/\$27.99, 320 pages

Intelligent Governance for the 21st Century: A Middle Way Between West and East, by Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels *Polity*, RRP£16.99/\$19.95, 200 pages

We are still living through what the historian John Lewis Gaddis once called a “long peace”. The threat of a global thermonuclear conflagration passed with the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are fewer armed conflicts – between states and within them – than at any time since 1945. We have never been so secure; and yet we have rarely felt so insecure.

One explanation for this apparent paradox is that expectations have changed. My grandparents' and parents' generations grew up to see interstate war as almost the norm. That is why they understood the genius of European integration – entrenching reconciliation on a continent that had twice stumbled to the very edge of self-destruction. The wars of my lifetime have been fought at a safe distance from London, Paris and Berlin.

The richer they are, the more people worry about anything that might jeopardise their stability and prosperity. During the financial crash, otherwise sane people dumped cash for gold ingots and filled their cupboards with canned food. And the world has been shrunk by globalisation. What happens in Somalia or Mali now casts a shadow thousands of miles away as rolling news brings distant wars into every living room.

There are, of course, things to worry about. The nuclear non-proliferation treaty is under serious strain. Pakistan, ever in peril of collapsing into a failed state, runs a nuclear production line. North Korea has just tested another bomb. If Iran gets the bomb, we can expect a nuclear free-for-all in one of the most dangerous parts of the world. Imagine what a nuclear weapon would do to the fortunes of al-Qaeda. Cyberspace offers a new arena for conflict in which small groups as well as states can deploy weapons of mass destabilisation.

The big story behind the present mood, however, is one about the changing nature and distribution of power. For two centuries America and Europe exercised effortless global hegemony. Now the east and south are rising. Globalisation and the rise of the rest have upended the old hierarchy. America's unipolar moment was blown up in Iraq and Afghanistan. Europe is enfeebled by economic crisis. Ever more porous borders have eroded the capacity of national politicians to defend the economic interests of their citizens. All the while, the postwar system of international governance has been falling into disrepair. The real source of our present insecurity is that we no longer know who is in charge.

A former Singaporean diplomat and a distinguished scholar, Kishore Mahbubani is known to regular readers of the FT as a trenchant critic of the sclerosis in the west's political institutions and of its brand of liberal capitalism. He is an eloquent cheerleader for the dynamism and optimism that has driven Asia's resurgence. From Singapore he looks out at a region where, for most people, tomorrow is always better than today.

In *The Great Convergence*, however, Mahbubani strikes out in a different direction. Instead of focusing on western decay, he concentrates on the interdependence woven into the fabric of this rebalancing world. The prosperity and security of the rising as well as the economically advanced nations, he argues, will depend on whether they find ways to share power.

For all the unavoidable rivalries, unsettled conflicts and seemingly

intractable disputes (think of recent clashes between China and its neighbours in the East and South China seas), Mahbubani manages to be optimistic. There will be plenty of bumps along the way but he believes that, with intelligence and goodwill, a collision between China and the US can be avoided and regional disputes (as much within the rest as with the west) can be managed.

Mahbubani points to forces of convergence – economic interdependence and the rise of a global middle class unite the interests of east and west. His core argument is that the world needs institutions and rules that recognise this mutuality of interest. The Group of 20 nations, he suggests, is a start. It did better than it was credited with in averting a global depression after the 2008 crash. But today’s leaders should also build on existing multilateral institutions to allow proud nations to think more globally.

He makes the case eloquently. Given the crisis in the eurozone, it is also encouraging to hear an Asian commentator say that others have something to learn from the European Union: “There is no fundamental reason why this European ecosystem of perpetual peace cannot be shared with the rest of humanity.”

The thesis is a welcome counterweight to the more familiar gloom of political scientists. The book is rich in insight into the hurdles and pitfalls that stand in the way of international co-operation. It takes a hard-headed look at the dynamics of China’s rise: the threat of conflict with a US reinvented as a Pacific power, the dangerous tensions between China and India, and the west’s troubled relationship with Islam among them. But the central argument is compelling. We are all sailing on the same global ship. Our mutual interest in staying afloat is more important than the size of our individual cabins.

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Power is not just shifting between states; it is also running away from them. This was a central theme of the US National Intelligence Council’s recent report on what the world might look like in 2030. The rising nations are jealous of their sovereignty – China has little time for the notion that national decision-making should be constrained by international rules. Yet powers associated with the old-fashioned Westphalian state increasingly reside in multinational corporations, footloose capital and cross-border networks of people and causes. Alongside this there has been another shift – the empowerment of the individual vis a vis established authority. Even in Beijing, the censors struggle to suppress the dissident voices heard across China’s social media.

Moisés Naím, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, sees this “megatrend” as rooted in the rising prosperity of



Mahbubani's global middle class, the revolution in mobility and a collapse of deference among healthier and better-educated citizens. In *The End of Power*, he sees old bastions under siege everywhere from the battlefield to the presidential palace. "To put it simply, power no longer buys as much as it did in the past ... power is easier to get, harder to use – and easier to lose."

That is a big claim. And Naím sometimes exaggerates. What he really means by the "destruction" of power is "diffusion". Power is a description of relative position. Someone with a stone-age axe looks powerful alongside an unarmed adversary. Giving the adversary a gun redistributes power rather than destroying it.

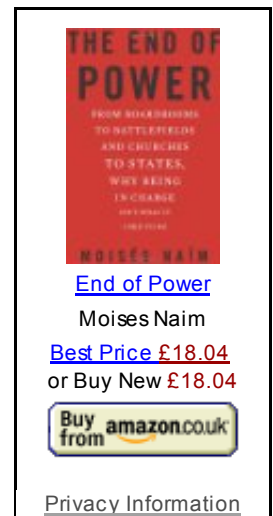
That said, Naím produces a fascinating account of the way states, corporations and traditional interest groups are finding it harder to defend their redoubts. Powerful states are vulnerable to the asymmetric warfare waged by Islamist terrorists or Somali pirates. Established corporate behemoths fall victim to nimble technology start-ups. Established Christianity is splintering with the advance of grassroots congregations. Press barons have been robbed of their influence by the explosion of information on the web. Wherever you look, the "megaplayers of old are being challenged by new microplayers".

Naím makes his case with eloquence. And for most of the book he celebrates the fragmentation of power. What's not to like in the challenge to monopolies, the enfranchisement of citizens and the triumph of innovation over entrenched advantage? But there is a downside. The diffusion of power provides a fillip for "myriad criminal, terrorist or otherwise malevolent non-state actors".

The big problem is that this more equal, diverse and diffuse world suffers from a shortage of governance. If the US is no longer going to serve as the global policeman, who is? And who or what fills the gap left by weakened governments when they struggle to provide the economic and physical security demanded by their citizens?

Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels are similarly preoccupied with power. But while Naím is sceptical about the disruptive impact of the internet, their *Intelligent Governance for the 21st Century* talks of its transformative effect on the nature of political authority. The rise of social media in civil society, they argue, is "a game-changer for governance".

Anyone who has looked at the microblogging phenomenon in China would agree there is something to this. But the argument can be overdone, as can be the jargon. I struggle to see Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg as one of the "virtual Red Guards of Silicon



Valley”.

The authors are more convincing when they turn to the destabilising impact of globalisation on state power and its impact on democratic and authoritarian regimes alike. The US and its western allies face a struggle to reconcile voters’ demands for prosperity and security with the realities of global interdependence. China faces a different but equally taxing problem: the authoritarian rule of the Communist party lacks popular legitimacy.

Berggruen, labelled by some the “homeless billionaire” because of a peripatetic existence that sees him flitting from expensive hotel suite to hotel suite, wants to put into practice what he preaches. His eponymous think-tank has a project to “rescue” the debt-ridden state of California by promoting longer-term policies that get to grips with its fiscal crisis. There is also a programme to inject substance into the international deliberations of the G20 leaders.

The recurring theme is the collision between the impatience of citizens empowered by social media and the imperative for decision-making that acknowledges the interconnectedness of national and international choices. Few would quarrel with this analysis; many will cavil at the authors’ conclusion that what’s needed is a new, hybrid form of governance marrying western democracy with a Confucian “accountable meritocracy”.

My guess is that we will have to live with our insecurities for some time yet. Those looking for a clear route-map for a world that has lost its compass will be disappointed. We are experiencing the biggest redistribution of power for 200 years. Such an upheaval was never going to be tidy. What is clear, though, is that west and east have still to grasp the paradox deftly illuminated by Mahbubani’s call for global governance. To retain real sovereignty over their national affairs, leaders will have to share it internationally.

Philip Stephens is an FT columnist



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