

## The World Today: A Ship With No Captain

By Meryl Haddad



“Is the world coming together or growing apart?” asked Dean Kishore Mahbubani at a talk on February 8, 2012. A count of raised hands after showed that the number of optimists in the audience – those who thought the world was coming together - outnumbered the pessimists. A rarity, beamed the Dean. “The right answer,” he said, “is that it is both”.

The dean spoke to students and faculty about the state of the world in terms of the current state of globalization. While referring to his recent time spent in Davos in the presence of a few big names, Dean Mahbubani presented three paradoxes about the growing shifts of globalization.

According to him, the first paradox is that while the world has become a “global village”, the togetherness that has resulted has led to a weakening of this so-called “village council”. Using the example of global warming, the dean highlighted how no general consensus exists, even though retired leaders know exactly what needs to be done. The reason for the reluctance to act lies in the desire for politicians to be re-elected, he said. No leader is ready to be the first to make the biggest sacrifices. In fact, one of his predictions for the U.S presidential elections of 2012 is that President Barack Obama would not even broach the topic of global warming – a clear example of this paradox when the US, the second largest emitter of carbon gases and a global leader, is most likely to make a difference.

The second paradox points to the West not being in any celebratory mood when it has contributed to a “shrinking” world through technology, openness and more transparency. The West is in fact, rather “depressed”, he said. It seems that it’s not just the global financial crisis that has caused this depression, but also the trends evolving across the Middle East and parts of East Asia. The cause for this depression could be attributed to the loss of direction the West has at this point in time, and how to assert supremacy in the face of an unprecedented series of revolts while grappling with a global financial crisis.

China is rising – at least, that’s the word on the street (and in the newspapers) and apparently the word that’s been spread through the dean’s various talks around the world. While China might look like an up –and-coming player, the third paradox the dean highlighted was the fact that this burgeoning economic power, despite being the biggest winner of globalization, does not want the responsibilities – and burdens – that come along with being in the glare of the economic spotlight. The dean shared an anecdote illustrating this point, saying on a recent trip to Beijing, he gave a lecture to Chinese officials about how China should become the global leader of today. “I thought I was very persuasive, but when I asked who agreed with me, no one raised their hands. When I asked who disagreed with me, they *all* raised their hands!”

Globalization is certainly a fact. But the recent crises and the trends shifting across the world show

that it has reaped unexpected consequences. These paradoxes may hold true now but things could change quickly and unexpectedly. What the world lacks right now, according to the dean, is a global leader, but perhaps the state of world affairs today, with battles on so many fronts, has opened up opportunities for countries to assert themselves and not simply allow one global leader to step up and take the reins.

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