

Interview with Kishore Mahbubani



Kishore Mahbubani is a writer, professor, and a former Singaporean diplomat who served twice as ambassador to the UN. He is the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at National University of Singapore. He has published three books -- "Can Asians Think?" "The New Asian Hemisphere," and "Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust between America and the World" -- and numerous articles in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Financial Times and elsewhere. Foreign Policy listed him as one of the top 100 global thinkers in 2005, 2010, and 2011.

Q: What is the nature of the “new global civilization” you write about in your new book. “The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World”?

Kishore Mahbubani: In the past few decades we have seen hundreds of millions rise up from poverty to form a global middle class, one decisively oriented toward peace and economic growth. That’s a remarkable development in human welfare. We should be celebrating this achievement and celebrating the great potential that we have at this time. Unfortunately we tend to get drowned out by bad news and we ignore the good news.

If you look at the populations in Asia, especially in China -- the last 30 years in China have been among the best 30 years that the people of China have experienced in 200 years. The last twenty years for the Indian people have been among the best 20 years they have experienced in 200 years. You see this spectacular improvement in living standards in Asia. One of the most stunning statistics about Asia is that today there are about 500 million people living in the middle class. By 2020 the number is going to explode about 3 ½ times, to 1.75 billion. This 1.75 billion population of people, having experienced this massive improvement in standard of living, want continued stability and the continued ability to develop and grow. So the desire to have peace and the desire to have an open world are getting stronger and stronger among these emerging middle classes.

Q: You write about global governance and the G20. But the G20 has lost prominence since 2008-09. How can the G20 regain momentum?

KM: To get the G20 to function effectively you need to change the mindset among the G20 leaders. This is exactly why I wrote “The Great Convergence” at this time. I want to explain to the G20 leaders that before, when 7 billion people lived in 193 separate countries, in effect they were living in 193 separate boats with a captain and crew for each boat. Now, as a result of the world having shrunk, the 7 billion people in the world no longer live in 193 separate boats. They live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat, but with no captain or crew to take care of the boat as a whole. The G20, both at the Washington DC meeting chaired by George W. Bush and the April 2009 meeting chaired by Gordon Brown, managed to save the world from a major global financial crisis. So they actually can function as captain and crew of the boat as a whole. So for the G20 to succeed, its leaders have to recognize that their job is not just to look after the cabins, they’ve got to secure the global boat as a whole

Q: What do you think will make them do that? Objective trends, or a conscious change in political behavior?

KM: Well, for a start I hope they’ll read my book! The whole point of the book is to change the mindset of these people. But at the same time I do think there’s something wrong with our human nature: We respond, not to long-term threats, but we only to crises. It’s better if you are in the same boat, to strengthen global multilateral institutions now, before you need to use them.

Q: You run against the international fashion a bit in seeing a strengthened role for the UN General Assembly. How do you see the GA fitting into the political evolution you advocate?

KM: The reason people set up national parliaments is so that, when there are strongly held opinions, those opinions can be aired in the parliament. If you wanted to prevent global instability and if you wanted to prevent political explosions on the ground, what you would do is create some kind of global parliament where people express their views strongly. Trying to create a global parliament from scratch is a mission impossible. So why not take the existing institution, imperfect as it is, to get a sense of what the world thinks?

Q: War seems to be becoming obsolete, and the statistics you present bear that out. Yet you do seem genuinely worried that war on a large scale might return. Why?

KM: One reason I spend so much time in the book discussing the geopolitical faultlines of our time is to show people that geopolitics has not disappeared. War is disappearing, but geopolitical challenges haven’t disappeared. There will be a contest for supremacy between the US and China whether we like it or not. The question is how you manage the contest. We have to learn how to manage these challenges more intelligently and not let them overwhelm us.

Q: Your book is generally optimistic, but it is a bit pessimistic about Chinese and American leadership. Do you think either is ready to see the world in the way you're suggesting?

KM: I'm feeling much more optimistic after Obama's reelection and the selection of Xi Jinping by the Chinese Communist Party. For both of them, the number one priority is developing and strengthening their economies, which means they will need to work together because they can both help each other. There will always be proxy battles, for example the United States will exploit the difficulties China is facing in the South China Sea. That's quite normal. But that doesn't mean the US and China can't cooperate on the economic front. On balance, I hope that the collaboration will be more than the competition.

Q: The US and Europe, particularly Europe, seem to have, in some sense, lost interest in extending their power outside their borders. What do you think the implications are of this?

KM: The policies of the US and Western Europe are very complex. They do worry about taking on global responsibilities. Hence for example they are walking away from the leadership of the WTO Doha round. That's why the Doha round is failing. The US and Europe can no longer provide the kind of leadership that they did in the past to get deals done. But at the same time they also want to cling to their positions of power. For example, despite undertakings at the London G20 summit the heads of the World Bank and IMF were again chosen by geographical origin rather than merit. It's a mistake for the West, with 12 % of the world population, to insist on controlling 60 percent of the permanent seats of the UN Security Council. That's why we need to restructure the UN Security Council.

Q: It does seem that the Western powers are in a defensive position with regard to their powers, rather than a creative position.

KM: You're right, and I think that's a mistake. The current attitude of the West toward a rapidly changing world is to adopt the defensive strategy of the ostrich. But putting your head in the sand doesn't mean the world is not going to change. I mean, the demographic share of the West is declining steadily, the share of global GNP of the West is going to decline significantly in the decades to come. Both are trends you cannot stop. If you see change you cannot stop, you want to adjust in advance, not wait for the harsh new realities to come to you. I'm sure Western Europe and the US can get a better deal today in refashioning global governance organizations than they will get 20 years from now. Time is not on their side.