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Interview – Kishore Mahbubani

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Kishore Mahbubani dedicated over five decades of his life to public service, for which he was conferred the Public Administration Medal (Gold) by the Singapore Government in 1998. In his 33 years as a Singapore diplomat, Kishore took on many challenging assignments, serving for example in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1973-74 during the Cambodian Civil War. He also served two stints as Singapore's Ambassador to the UN (1984-1989 and 1998-2004) and held the position of Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1994 to 1998.

He was appointed the Founding Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in August 2004 and led the School until 2017. He has published ten books. His ninth book, The Asian 21st Century, is an open access volume which has been downloaded over 4 million times. His latest book, a memoir titled Living the Asian Century, was published in August 2024. Kishore has been listed among the world's top 100 public intellectuals by Foreign Policy and Prospect magazines and among the Top 50 individuals who would shape the debate on the future of capitalism by the Financial Times. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in October 2019.

Where do you see the most exciting research or debates happening in your field today?

One exciting area of debate is over the resurgence of Asia, especially China. China's emergence has, for example, significantly shifted the geopolitical balance in Asia, especially Southeast Asia. Contemporary International Relations (I.R.) scholars are beginning to realised that these power shifts are among the most significant in our world.

My friend and colleague, Professor Yuen Foon Khong, and Professor Joseph Liow from the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, have recently co-published a fascinating article in *Foreign Affairs*: "Southeast Asia Is Starting to Choose: Why the Region Is Leaning Toward China."

Their study of the alignments of the ten ASEAN countries vis-à-vis the US and China showed that while Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have been successfully hedging between the US and China, 5 out of 10 ASEAN countries are now more aligned with China, while only one, the Philippines, is clearly aligned with the US. Furthermore, 9 out of 10 ASEAN countries have drifted more towards China in the last 15 years, each for a different mix of reasons.

China is an important source of economic opportunities and is geographically close. However, many are still concerned about how it will use its growing power in the region. Meanwhile, the US has long provided the region with security and investment and has long been seen as a trusted partner of Southeast Asia. However, it is geographically distant; has begun stepping back on its military and economic commitments in the region under Trump; has imposed tariffs on all the ASEAN countries; and has denounced some ASEAN governments on issues related to corruption, human rights, and democracy. Its support of Israel in the Gaza war has also angered and alienated the large Muslim populations in Southeast Asia.

I have also been enjoying the debate on the rise of the Global South. I had the pleasure of reading*The Non-Aligned World: Striking Out in an Era of Great Power Competition* by Professor Jorge Heine of the Pardee School, Professor Carlos Fortin of the University of Chile, and Carlos Ominami, president of the Foro Permanente de Política Exterior. It's clear that the rest of the Global South is also reshaping the world order. Global South countries are legitimately

calling for a greater say in shaping the new world order and to set themselves up for long-term success.

At the same time, in order to shape a new, hopefully more inclusive world order, we need to understand the history and ideological claims behind our current order. Amitav Acharya's *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West* argues against the idea that order, and the principles that underlie the order we have enjoyed for the past several decades, are uniquely Western. Actually, the principles of international order also derive from other cultures. As Acharya wrote, "We have forgotten that world order – the political architecture enabling cooperation and peace among nations – existed long before the rise of the West, and that many of the ideas we assume are Western inventions actually originated in other civilizations. Mechanisms and values that are central to world order – such as diplomacy, economic interdependence, freedom of seas, principles for the protection of people in war and peace, preservation of the environment, and cooperation among major powers, to name a few – emerged over millennia across the globe (p. 2)." Clearly, many of the ideas and values that support our world order exist in other cultures, too. The world will not suddenly collapse into disorder if we transition into a new system and away from a Western dominated world order.

But how should other nations navigate the interests of the US and China as we try to build this new system? To what extent will the rest of the world be able to break past the mental colonisation that the past 100 years of Western dominance has created as we think through the difficult question of how our world can function better for all of us? What would a more equitable world order which takes into account not just Western thought, but also African thought, Asian thought, Latin American thought, Middle Eastern thought, and so on, look like? Will it be possible to implement? It will be fascinating to see how all this plays out over the next few decades. Sadly, most American scholars, who dominate the discourse in the I.R. field, pay little attention to and fail to study the deep wells of non-Western thought.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The three most significant teachers I had in the field of geopolitics were Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and S. Rajaratnam. They were the three key founding fathers of Singapore. They overcame great odds and led Singapore to its present success because they were willing to take bold and unconventional steps. They rigorously challenged conventional assumptions. They were equally open to differing perspectives, as they were interested in discovering the truth.

Lee Kuan Yew was an extraordinary leader. His intellectual prowess, political acumen, and oratorical skills were unmatched by most world leaders. He taught me that an effective speech should always be substantive and meaningful, devoid of superfluous elements. He was a rare combination of a powerful freedom fighter as well as an exceptional nation builder. Whenever he embarked on a political initiative, he pursued multiple goals simultaneously – both domestic and geopolitical. He is the greatest politician I have ever encountered and could well be one of the greatest of all time. Henry Kissinger, who was a close friend of Lee Kuan Yew, said, "As the decades went by, it was moving – and inspirational – to see Lee, in material terms the mayor of a medium-size city, bestride the international scene as a mentor of global strategic order. A visit by Lee to Washington was a kind of national event. A presidential conversation was nearly automatic; eminent members of the Cabinet and Congress would seek meetings. They did so not to hear of Singapore's national problems; Lee rarely, if ever, lobbied policymakers for assistance. His theme was the indispensable US contribution to the defense and growth of a peaceful world. His interlocutors attended not to be petitioned but to learn from one of the truly profound global thinkers of our time."

Goh Keng Swee was both deeply intellectual and remarkably practical. He contributed greatly to almost every aspect of Singapore's development, making transformational contributions to defence, education, the economy, poverty reduction, and finance. He was a true renaissance man. He was one of the most intellectually curious people I have ever encountered. I particularly appreciated his habit of asking big questions. He also understood power very well and was able to use his influence and standing to make powerful and radical changes when necessary. His contributions to Singapore's growth, development, and success were as crucial as Lee Kuan Yew's. He was the ultimate realist and pragmatist in I.R. issues.

S. Rajaratnam was a remarkably warm and kind person. He was very generous with his compliments, even to us junior officers. He valued open dialogue and candid discussion. At the same time, he was a formidable debater, especially when facing pro-communist groups in Singapore or confronting pro-Soviet forces on the international stage, and he never backed down from a challenge. From him, I learned the importance of courage and perseverance, even when the odds seem insurmountable.

All three were paragons of integrity, upholding the highest standards of honesty and public service. They were also unwavering realists in matters of geopolitics. While I was a pacifist in my university days, working with them fundamentally overturned my worldview. They taught me to hold no illusions about the nature of power. Great powers will always put their interests ahead of principle in dealing with small states.

As I document in my memoirs, *Living the Asian Century: An Undiplomatic Memoir*, my two years in the UNSC erased any remaining illusions about the nature of our world. It became clear to me that power always trumps principles in international relations, and that a small state like Singapore cannot afford to indulge in idealist fantasies.

In *The Asian 21st Century* (2022), you argue that the era of Western dominance is ending. How should Western societies prepare for a world where their values and leadership no longer go uncontested?

Western societies should not fear the rise of the Rest. The rest of the world wants to work with the West, not dominate the West. However, Western societies cannot continue as if they are the dominant power in the world.

As Bill Clinton in 2003, "If you believe that maintaining power and control and absolute freedom of movement and sovereignty is important to your country's future, there's nothing inconsistent in [the U.S. behaving unilaterally]. We're the biggest, most powerful country in the world now […] But if you believe that we should be trying to create a world with rules and partnerships and habits of behaviour that we would like to live in when we're no longer the military political economic superpower in the world, then you wouldn't do that. It just depends on what you believe." Sadly, this acutely wise advice by Bill Clinton has never been heeded by the US or by the West in general.

Western societies need to create the conditions for their own future success in the coming multicivilizational and multipolar world. For example, our current international order provides many benefits to the West, which played a dominant role in designing it. But in order for it to retain its legitimacy, its institutions need to reflect the power structure of today's world, not yesterday's. For example, the permanent members of the UNSC are the US, China, the UK, France, and Russia. The heads of the IMF and World Bank have always been from the US or EU. The countries with the highest voting shares in the IMF are: 1. the US, 2. Japan, 3. China, 4. Germany, and 5. France.

Yet, the countries with the highest GDPs (in current prices) are now 1. the US, 2. China, 3. Germany, 4. Japan, and 5. India. If international institutions don't serve the needs of newly powerful and influential countries, they will be incentivised to leave and set up alternative systems. This will not be in the best interests of the West. Increasingly, the world is facing more and more problems that we need to address together, such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism. We cannot work in silos and hope for the best.

In a similar vein, the US needs to go back to respecting international law. It cannot set a precedent of great powers violating international law and UN principles and yet expect future great powers to abide by these same rules and norms.

In *Has the West Lost It?* (2018), you describe Western strategic blindness and moral arrogance. Have recent events such as the Ukraine war or US policy on Gaza prompted any meaningful self-reflection or change among Western states?

The Ukraine war has revealed a paradoxical truth about the West. It has shown starkly the geopolitical naivete of the EU countries and the geopolitical cunning of the US. If Europe is to become a strong, independent player in the new, multipolar world, it needs to become equally cunning and calculating about its own long-term geopolitical interests. It cannot simply follow America's lead in geopolitics. Firstly, the US, by electing Trump twice, has declared that its goal

is to Make America Great Again (MAGA), not Make Europe Great Again (MEGA). Clearly, the US will always act in its own interests, not in Europe's interests.

The US has much to gain from prolonging the Ukraine war: it has severely weakened Russia with relatively little cost to the US. The US has been sending its old stockpiles of weapons and gear to Ukraine, and used the funds appropriated for Ukraine assistance to replace them with new ones. Nearly 70% of US aid to Ukraine thus stays in the US, boosting its economy and strengthening its military industrial complex. Things are different for Europe. The most important part of the word geopolitics is not 'politics' but 'geo'. Because the US is far away, Washington can provoke Moscow with little consequence. But Europe will still have to live with Russia for the next 100 years, if not 1,000 years.

The biggest geopolitical mistake Europe made after the Cold War was failing to come up with a consistent, long-term plan for integrating Russia into the European order. If there was to be durable peace, Europe needed to work out a new grand strategic bargain with Russia, with each side accommodating the other's core interests, and with the goal of gradually developing strategic trust with each other. Russia's most serious long-term strategic rival is not the EU but China, with which it shares the world's longest border. With China's power now having increased tremendously vis-à-vis Russia's, Russia should be trying to balance against China. Yet, the failure of the US and EU to take Russia's interests into account – for example, by expanding NATO into territories that were once part of the Soviet Union – has instead pushed Russia into cooperating with China. This result shows the geopolitical incompetence of the EU.

Another major issue was that Europe never seriously tried to understand Russia. It embraced Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis and expected Russia to become a liberal democracy. That was complete naivete. It's clear now that not only Russia, but also other rising powers like China and India, will not become carbon copies of liberal Western democracies anytime soon. Europeans must now adapt to a world in which they belong to the minority – and in which their worldview is that of the minority. In a multi-civilizational world, we need to interact with each other on the basis of mutual respect, not with the presumption that one's own culture is superior.

In the same vein, the war in Gaza has done more to diminish the standing of the West than any other recent event. We should all condemn the heinous attack by Hamas on 7th October 2022. Yet, the world is taken aback at continued Western support of Israel despite its disproportionate responses and disregard for international law. At the same time, the war has exposed the EU's double standards. As Josep Borrell and Kalypso Nicolaidis wrote in their recent article in Foreign Affairs, "The EU cannot impose an import ban on products from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine and shy away from imposing them on products from illegal settlements in the West Bank. Nor can the EU call on other states to honour the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and announce that it will not enforce the same body's warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu."

In short, no. The Western states have not engaged in any meaningful reflection. One key goal of my writings is to encourage Western minds to engage in deeper reflection.

India is often seen as a swing state in global geopolitics. Given its historical non-alignment and current strategic balancing act, how do you evaluate India's long-term geopolitical alignment — especially in the context of US–China rivalry?

India is a rising power. It is now the 4th largest economy by GDP (nominal). In a few years, India will become the 3rd largest. So far, India is managing its rise well. It's getting closer to the West, but has not abandoned its old ties with Russia and the Global South. India is both part of the Quad on the one hand, and the BRICS and SCO on the other.

The main challenge India faces is the troubled India-China relationship. The two countries have a longstanding, unresolved border issue. While the relationship was somewhat stable in the 2010s, Chinese and Indian troops clashed in June 2020 along their restive border, leading to casualties on both sides. This clash set relations back considerably over the past few years. While the border agreement of October 2024 offers some hope of stabilisation in the bilateral ties, it is highly unlikely that we will see a full normalisation of ties between China and India. However,

India will not fully align itself with the United States either.

India will remain non-aligned (or, in the words of Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, multi-aligned) in the medium-term. In about two decades, as India's economy rises above all the other countries (except for the US and China), India will also emerge as a third pole in the world order.

ASEAN diplomacy has often been praised for maintaining regional stability, yet its response to issues like Myanmar has drawn criticism. Drawing from your tenure as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN, what role should ASEAN play in managing US–China tensions and intra-Asian crises?

ASEAN has so far done a brilliant job in maintaining good ties with both China and the US. ASEAN is China's biggest trading partner. The US invests more in ASEAN than it does in any other part of Asia. Both the US and China are ASEAN dialogue partners. For instance, both Marco Rubio and Wang Yi attended the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting which took place in Malaysia on 8-11 July 2025. ASEAN should continue to engage the US and China in its regional dialogues. It may in this way serve as a key meeting point for US-China dialogues too.

ASEAN has also helped facilitate meetings between China, Japan and Korea at ASEAN+ dialogues and ASEAN-led East Asia Summit meetings during the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period when these countries were often at loggerheads with each other and reduced bilateral dialogue with each other. In this way, ASEAN helped defuse tensions between other Asian countries.

ASEAN has also played a constructive role in defusing crises between ASEAN member states. In 2011, when Thailand and Cambodia were at military loggerheads with each other over the Preah Vihear temple complex, Indonesia, as the ASEAN chair, undertook a "shuttle diplomacy" (led by former Indonesian foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa). Indonesia engaged Bangkok and Phnom Penh directly and succeeded in diffusing a potential military crisis.

However, with regards to Myanmar, owing to the inherent complexity of the situation, ASEAN has decided that patience is possibly the best strategy at present. In the I.R. field, there are many "wicked" problems that cannot be solved quickly. Myanmar is one of them. Yet, patience and constructive engagement by ASEAN with Myanmar will eventually deliver positive results.

Singapore has masterfully balanced relations with both Washington and Beijing. What can other small and medium powers learn from Singapore's strategic pragmatism, especially those caught in today's polarized geopolitical environment?

Singapore has declared that it will do its best to be friends with both the US and China. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in June 2020, then Singapore PM Mr Lee Hsien Loong explained, "Asian countries see the United States as a resident power that has vital interests in the region. At the same time, China is a reality on the doorstep. Asian countries do not want to be forced to choose between the two." And, he warned, "if either attempts to force such a choice – if Washington tries to contain China's rise or Beijing seeks to build an exclusive sphere of influence in Asia – they will begin a course of confrontation that will last decades and put the long-heralded Asian century in jeopardy." Former PM Lee Hsien Loong is right in highlighting that an untrammelled US-China contest could jeopardise the long-heralded Asian century.

Although Singapore has always worked hard to strengthen our relationship with both powers, if the US or China decide to put pressure on Singapore to take sides, it will be very challenging for it and other small and medium powers to resist that pressure. Fortunately, Singapore is a member of ASEAN. Being part of a regional grouping gives Singapore more leverage and negotiating power with the great powers, as long as the group can stay united. Small and medium powers need to work hard to balance the great powers by deepening their ties with each other and lessen their dependence on the US and China, whether in terms of economics or security. Singapore should also work actively to strengthen ASEAN as a regional organisation.

In your debates and writings, you've called for a reform of global institutions, especially the UN Security Council. Do you still see realistic pathways for such reform in the near future, or is multilateralism stagnating?

The UNSC must be reformed. It should house the great powers of today, not yesterday. For instance, the UK should have given up its seat to India not today, but yesterday. I have also proposed a 7-7-7 formula in *The Great Convergence*. This involves having seven permanent members, but also having a rotation of seven semi-permanent members taken from 28 states. The Quincy Institute in Washington DC is also pushing an idea for UNSC reform, based on the principles of my 7-7-7 formula.

It is a fact that such reforms take time. Yet, the UNSC, especially the five permanent members, will soon face a painful dilemma. If they keep the current composition of permanent members, they will lose their credibility. Countries like India could ignore the UNSC decisions. To avoid losing their credibility, the P5 should change the composition of permanent members.

You wrote in The New Asian Hemisphere (2008) that China is not an expansionist power in the traditional Western sense. How do you interpret current Western narratives about China's assertiveness in the South China Sea or its Belt and Road Initiative?

China's approach in the South China Sea has largely been to deal with claimant countries bilaterally. China has not sought to enforce its claims unilaterally through violent military action.

Ambassador Stapleton Roy, former US Ambassador to China, once recounted an incident that I detail in my book, *Has China Won?*: "In a joint press conference with President Obama on September 25, 2015, Xi Jinping had proposed a more reasonable approach on the South China Sea. Xi had supported full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, signed by China and all ten ASEAN members; had called for early conclusion of the China-ASEAN consultations on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea; and had added that China had no intention of militarizing the Spratlys, where it had engaged in massive reclamation work on the reefs and shoals it occupied. Roy said that Obama missed an opportunity to capitalize on this reasonable proposal. Instead, the US Navy stepped up its naval patrols. China responded by proceeding with militarization" (p.80)

Even though I cited a credible American source in saying that the US gave up a valuable opportunity to demilitarise the South China Sea, no Western journal or media channel has reported this important fact. This is a concrete example of how the Western media cannot be trusted to be fair and objective in its reporting.

Unfortunately, China is certainly becoming more assertive as it rises. However, it is not becoming aggressive. There is an important difference. As America was rising in the late 19th century, it became more aggressive. I illustrate the difference between an "assertive" China and an "aggressive" America, using Graham Allison's analysis, in *Has China Won*:

"As China becomes more and more powerful, it will, like all great powers, assert its power and influence. Just as America's neighbors in Latin America had to adapt and adjust to American power as it exploded in the late nineteenth century, China's neighbors will also have to adapt and adjust. But China will not resort to military means as its first expression of power. This is why Graham Allison wisely reminded his fellow Americans to be careful in wishing that China would be more like us:

"Americans enjoy lecturing Chinese to be "more like us." Perhaps they should be more careful what they wish for. Historically how have emerging hegemons behaved? To be more specific, how did Washington act just over a century ago when Theodore Roosevelt led the US into what he was supremely confident would be an American century? In the decade that followed his arrival in Washington, the US declared war on Spain, expelling it from the Western Hemisphere and acquiring Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines; threatened Germany and Britain with war unless they agreed to settle the disputes on American terms; supported an insurrection in Colombia to create a

new country, Panama, in order to build a canal; and declared itself the policeman of the Western Hemisphere, asserting the right to intervene whenever and wherever it judged necessary – a right it exercised nine times in the seven years of TR's presidency alone" (pp.88-89).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an initiative in which countries are both free to join and free to leave. While it is China-led and initiated, the BRI projects are undertaken in collaboration with the host country. It is not enforced upon it. Professors Deborah Brautigam of Johns Hopkins and Meg Rithmire of Harvard have done extensive research to come to the conclusion that the BRI does not entail any "debt trap diplomacy". They are unequivocal when they write, "Our research shows that Chinese banks are willing to restructure the terms of existing loans and have never actually seized an asset from any country". Sadly, the Western media has flooded the world with jaundiced narratives on the BRI. If BRI was really so terrible, why have over 150 countries voluntarily applied to join the BRI?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Young scholars of international relations should go beyond studying just international relations, the subject and its theories, alone. They should also study history, particularly Asian history. A knowledge of Chinese, Indian and Southeast Asian history will help scholars view the return of Asia in its larger context. Similarly, scholars should also study philosophy, both Western and Eastern. This will enable them to view the world from diverse prisms: the Western, which often sees the world in black and white; and the Eastern, which often regards the world in a more nuanced fashion.

Getting a grasp of Asian history and philosophy will enable scholars to use both Western and Eastern concepts to understand our world better.