

Former Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani

Former Singapore Diplomat Urges U.S. To Return to Its Best Traditions

by John Shaw

Those in the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress who believe America's standing in the world will be improved by a refined foreign policy message or an aggressive public diplomacy campaign should talk to Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations. Or they should read his enlightening book, "Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World."

Mahbubani, a member of Singapore's Foreign Service for more than 30 years, believes that the United States has done enormous good for the world, but that it must change key policies if it hopes to regain the respect and admiration it earned in the decades after World War II.

In an interview with The Washington Diplomat, Mahbubani praised America for its remarkable contributions to the world, especially in the past 60 years. "America changed the grain of human history. When it emerged as a great power after the Second World War, it could have behaved as other great powers have behaved throughout history. It could have colonized and conquered. But it did the exact opposite. It created a global system which allowed other nations to grow and thrive. That's very unusual behavior for a great power."

Mahbubani said America has given the world an important array of gifts: a contagious sense of hope and optimism, remarkable technological advances, a commitment to the rule of law, and a belief in the idea of meritocracy. These gifts, he said, have improved the lives of hundreds of millions of people and have inspired nations across the world.

However, at the end of the Cold War, America made an "awesome strategic error—it decided to behave like an ordinary country," the former diplomat said. "With the end of the Cold War, America basically told the world: 'You take care of yourself. We're tired of bearing the burden. We're going home.' That process of disentanglement created many of the problems today," he said.

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didn't start with the Bush administration. It started at the end of the Cold War. It is something the rest of the world is troubled by," he added.

Mahbubani believes that Americans are generally unaware of the powerful consequences of U.S. policies, especially when these policies are designed for domestic reasons. "I want Americans to be aware that their actions affect others. Americans should be more concerned about the impact of their actions for the rest of the world," he said.

"The single biggest force on the world stage is American power. American power is so enormous, but most Americans aren't aware of it. Often the U.S. makes a decision with no intention for it to have global consequences. The hardest thing is to convince Americans that they live in an interconnected world and in this world American power is so enormous that its decisions have an effect on the entire world."

As a specific example, Mahbubani argues that U.S. cotton subsidies designed to help domestic farmers have destabilized the global cotton market and have had a devastating effect on millions of African farmers.

He said many long-time supporters of the United States are concerned that the country is less committed to a global system of rules and institutions that were once the hallmark of U.S. foreign policy.

"Many wonder if America still believes in creating a level playing field for the whole world. They fear that America is walking away from multinational commitments. But I believe it is in America's national interest that there be strong multinational institutions."

According to Mahbubani, the United States not only appeared to abandon its commitment to global rules at the end of the Cold War, but also dealt roughly and dismissively with certain allies. This was especially true of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mahbubani said the United States abandoned its support for Pakistan when the Cold War ended—a reality that continues to shape Pakistan's posture toward the United States and causes ambivalent views about the war on terrorism.

"The moment Pakistan was no longer needed, the United States dropped it immediately. So it really does not serve Pakistan's interests to see the battle against Osama bin Laden end with a swift, decisive victory. America has demonstrated that it is an unreliable ally," he said.

And in Afghanistan, the United States inadvertently aroused the powerful force of Islamic solidarity that had been latent for centuries when it helped organize the resistance to the Soviet occupation in the early 1980s. Once the Soviets were defeated, the Americans left

Afghanistan to fend for itself and the Taliban eventually emerged as the dominant force there and allowed the country to become a haven for Bin Laden. "One of the controversial points I make is to suggest that the roots of 9/11 is America's decision to walk away from Afghanistan," Mahbubani said.

The recent U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created striking visual images of the United States at war in an Islamic country, he added, and the continuing resistance of Bin Laden has bolstered his stature in the Islamic world.

Mahbubani argues that globalization, which was propelled by U.S. technology, has played a huge role in the expansion of virulent forms of Islam. "Globalization facilitated the flow of a conservative brand of Islam throughout the world," he said. "The conservative arabization of

Southeast Asian Islam was a direct result of Western technology. The West changed the face of Islam, but was unaware it had done so."

Mahbubani said the "Al-Jazeera effect," which was made possible by the global 24-hour television model largely created by CNN, may turn out to be one of the most important forces in creating a sense of solidarity among the 1.2 billion Muslims who once lived in mostly distinct and separate communities.

Soft-spoken and precise, Mahbubani said he enjoyed his career on diplomacy but now relishes his academic work. He is helping to create a new institution as the dean of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore, which draws students from Asia and across the world.

He is also beginning to sketch out a book that is close to his heart: Asia's increasingly important role in the world. "The big story of the 21st century is the re-emergence of Asia," he said. "The big challenge for Asians in the 21st century is that the Asian economies will take off, but the governments and regulatory institutions must keep pace with the economic growth."

Mahbubani is also keenly interested in America's relationship with China. He

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blames erratic U.S. policies for keeping that crucial relationship unstable and volatile. "America has been imprudent in its policies toward China. It has used China when it suited American geopolitical interests and ditched it when it no longer served American interests," he said.

"There is a gulf between the two countries that is very dangerous. America should understand Chinese history better. America has presumed that a young nation just over two centuries old could remake a 5,000-year-old civilization in its image."

Mahbubani said the Chinese public appreciates the peace and prosperity achieved under the communist regime, and that the Chinese are willing to wait, even another century, to fully work out their political structure.

"America looks at China from a very narrow perspective and sees the glass half empty. But the Chinese see the glass as three-quarters full. This is the best time in China for more than 200 years," he said. "Most Chinese realize that over the long run they need to become more democratic. But it may take some time."

Mahbubani pointed out that U.S. support for Chinese dissidents, Taiwan and Tibet is viewed as deeply provocative in Beijing. He also said the bloody tragedy in Tiananmen Square in 1989 is more comprehensible for Americans if they look at events through the eyes of the Chinese leadership. "If Deng Xiaoping had lost his nerve at Tiananmen, China could have wasted decades trying to regain its sense of drive and purpose," he said.

Mahbubani called Deng Xiaoping's legacy profound, noting that he will be seen as one of the towering figures of the 20th century. "History will eventually recognize him as one of the world's greatest leaders, delivering greater improvement to more lives than virtually any other leader," he said. "No one comes close when you consider the num-

ber of human beings whose lives have been uplifted, transformed and changed because of his policies—hundreds of millions of lives have been transformed. He turned China on a dime."

Mahbubani said he is concerned about the narrow U.S. debate on international affairs after 9/11 and laments its almost exclusive focus on combating terrorism. This focus has created problems that have been deeply hurtful to the nation's international status, such as the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo.

"Guantanamo had an almost metaphysical impact. For many people in the world, America lost its moral standing. Guantanamo had a profound effect on America's best friends overseas, the liberal elites. America suspended the rule of law that had been its hallmark," he said. "Guantanamo may have had a more profound effect on the perceptions of intellectuals overseas of American power than Abu Ghraib did."

Mahbubani's stinging critique of U.S. foreign policy is offered in soft and sad tones. But he insists the United States still has a chance to regain its stature as a powerful force for global good.

Looking to the future, he said the United States should advance policies that provide economic and political stability, be more aware of the global consequences of its domestic policies, and strongly support international law and multinational institutions such as the United Nations. Above all, it should set a good example as a vibrant, open and forward-looking democracy.

"All is not lost. There is hope, and there is time. America can turn things around and regain the goodwill that it both accumulated and lost absentmindedly. To do this, it may be helpful to pay more attention to the aspirations of the 6 billion other occupants of our shrinking globe."

John Shaw is a contributing writer for The Washington Diplomat.