

BOOKS: A Wake-up call to America
Reviewed by Hardev Kaur
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DRAWING upon his vast experience, Kishore Mahbubani expresses what many around the world, and especially Asia, think of the United States and its policies. A view that Americans themselves do not see, or fail to see. It is a sad commentary that a world power such as the US, which has given the world much to be thankful for, has lost its way. This is a dilemma not only for the US but also for the rest of the world.

America looked the other way when it was most needed. It failed to appreciate the anger of the 1.2 billion Muslims around the world. It has been imprudent in its dealings with the 1.2 billion Chinese. It has failed to recognise and appreciate the impact its policies have on others. It has unleashed globalisation forces which it is "ill equipped" to handle. It supports leaders and pulls out the rug when they are no longer useful to the US.

America's prestige is diminishing in the world and Kishore addresses the salient foreign policy dilemmas for America today. The "ignorance" and "arrogance" of a world power — the US — is remarkable". While many books have been written about the US, this is the first that gives the reader a view of how Asians look at America.

Kishore, born in British Singapore and having lived in the US for many years, captures the essence of two different worlds — Asia and America.

The self-confessed "friend of the US", Kishore tells his friends what they should know, but they may not necessarily like what they hear. America should "wake up" and listen.

Only good friends will say what might not be palatable. He writes, "The Americans like to believe that there is only one right way. But their perception is not necessarily shared by others".

This, among others, was clearly reflected in the handling of the Asian financial crisis. The Americans, who have a major share in the running of the Bretton Woods Institutions — World Bank and IMF — insisted on policies that worsened the already bad situation.

Not only were the Americans not prepared to offer a helping hand to Thailand, as they did with the Mexican Peso as "Thailand's not on our border", according to the then Treasury Secretary Larry Summers. The US would also not allow anyone else to do so. It stopped the Japanese unilateral effort from helping its Asian neighbours. The message that America sent to distressed Asian nations was loud and clear:

"Not only will we not help you. We will also not let others help you." And this will be remembered by Asians for a long time — how the US walked away from them in their hour of need.

America wields great power and as Kishore adds, "Though American power remains the single most influential force on the globe, many in the world are disappointed with America's leadership and would like to see America take the lead in creating a stable world order. The main question, however, is whether America will be able to revive the kind of leadership necessary to bring this about."

The world expects a lot more from America but sadly it does not deliver.

"The idea that we need to have better management of global issues has not yet sunk into American consciousness."

And unfortunately, "America is one of the countries least prepared to handle the world it has changed."

Kishore writes that "The twenty-first century will be immensely different from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Americans are only disadvantaging themselves if they believe that the ideological perspectives of the past two centuries, even those that have served them well over these past two centuries, are sufficient to help them understand the different world of the twenty-first century".

Kishore's book is a wake-up call. His plea is for American leaders to rise above short-term self-interest to offer enlightened leadership in a future they have helped set in motion. But will America wake up? Will it listen?