

TIME

July 12, 1999

The Thinker: Asia's most Glamorous Diplomat Pens a Winner

When Kishore Mahbubani spoke recently in New York City, he drew a glittering crowd of diplomats, bankers and politicians.

It was an impressive audience for Singapore's U.N. ambassador, but Mahbubani is impressive, a diplomat-philosopher whose book, *Can Asians Think?*, has made him a mustmeet thinker.

The book has been controversial, not because Mahbubani offers a particularly lurid answer to the title question-actually, he equivocates-but because of his belief that Asia is destined for greater world power, at American expense. Critics have called him anti-Western, but Mahbubani's argument is really with Western arrogance, with leaders who insist capitalism and democracy are the answer for all nations. In fact, he says, the West's hubris is accelerating its decline and polluting relations with proud, ambitious nations such as China and Japan.

Even at his most strident, Mahbubani writes with a diplomat's charm, gleefully untangling political knots into simple threads. The book has a special force because it comes from a man who is a prototype 21st century leader-he has his own URL-and a leading candidate to one day succeed Kofi Annan as U.N. Secretary-General. That pedigree is surely responsible for some of his buzz, but the ambassador's book is anything but a faddish flash.