

Unofficial Translation

Special Interview with Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

“The fate of the global community depends on the US’s relations with China and Islam”: Kishore Mahbubani

The Dong-a Ilbo Tue. 17 Jan 06, pg A8, by reporter Jeong Mi-kyung in Singapore

Singapore, a small country with a population worth a tenth of that of Korea, is famous for producing a few practiced statesmen who have had a firm grip on the international stage. Kishore Mahbubani (57), the Dean of NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, has recently been rising as an international political thinker, like the first PM of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew. He appeared like a morning star of the world intellectuals’ community by publishing his book titled “Can Asians Think?”(1999). In the book, he predicted the revival of Asia amid a serious financial crisis. Mahbubani has drawn public attention once again when his next book titled “Beyond the Age of Innocence” was published at the end of 2005, calling for the recovery of the US’s role as a guard for world peace. The Economist and the Washington Post called him “a Toynbee of Asia” and “a Max Weber of neo-Confucian ideas.”

The Dong-a Ilbo interviewed Mr Mahbubani, who was chosen as one of the “top 100 intellectuals of the world” by the Foreign Policy and the Prospect in 2005, on 13 January 2006 in Singapore.

The US’s foreign policy losing consistency instigates conflicts with Islam

What China, who dreams of becoming an economic giant, is most afraid of is US’ containment

Japan is standing at a crossroad whether to choose the West or Asia, faced with ‘a century of Asia’

-What do you think is the most important factor that can decide the fate of the global community in the 21st century?

“It is the role of the US. In other words, the world might enjoy a peaceful era or face a terrifying result such as wars depending on which kind of relations the US would establish with the two threatening powers.”

-Who are the two powers?

“They are China and the Islamic world. The US-Islam relations have been worsened to the extent that they seem almost not to be able to recover their bilateral relations. The conflicts between the US and China have also been deepening.

-Don't you think that the US keeps good relations with China on the whole?

“We need to divide it into government and social levels before thinking about the issue. The relations between Bush and Hu Jintao have been friendly. Meanwhile, social atmosphere is different. When the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld mentioned the need for China to carry out political reform in Singapore last year, the wild waves of anti-US sentiment had risen in China. China has been afraid of what might happen if it fell into a chaos like Russia did after the Cold War due to the US's pressure for democracy.”

-If so, what kind of relations China does want to establish with the US?

“China wants to rise up as an economic power with the support of the US, like Germany and Japan did after the wars. That is a “Jiang Zemin (江泽民)- style world order.” Currently, China has no concern in becoming a military power. What China is most afraid of is the containment policy of the US. China has shared the “fruits” of its economic growth with its Asian neighboring countries, and actively attended the East Asia Summit and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) so as to hold the US in check.

-Do you think that the conflicts with China and Islam are attributed to the Bush administration's unilateralism?

“It can be said that President Bush has worsened them in part. However, we need to approach the change in the US’s foreign policy from a more structural aspect. Since the World War II, the US had spearheaded the world peace and democracy. The US had maintained a “compassionate” diplomacy line under which it paid attention to the political and economic development of other countries for its national interest or an altruistic reason. However, the US has changed since the Cold War era ended. The domestic political consideration of the US came to influence its foreign policy. With the world becoming smaller, the US started not to care about how its behavior influences the fate of other countries. If the US was called an “extraordinary country” in the past, now it is an “ordinary country.”

-What kind of results has such change in the US's foreign policy brought about?

“Since the US sticks to its short-term interest, a “double standard” emerges from place to place. That is a natural consequence caused by the loss of consistency in its policy. The US has become a “wild card.” It is unfortunate that the US, a country with the most stabilised political system, has become the most unpredictable one in international politics.”

-How do you assess the US's diplomacy with NK based on the six-party talks?

“From the point of the UN’s view, we can realise the fact that North Korea is the most closed society in the world. Maybe Cuba and Myanmar are the next ones. The worst way of dealing with a closed society would be “isolation.” Meanwhile, “engagement” would be the best way. The Soviet Union collapsed in the end due to the US’s engagement.

-Recently, India is attracting attention as much as China. Tell us more about how you assess the growth potential and the international standing of India.

“The US welcomes the rising of India, because, unlike China, India has a tradition of democracy. Also, the US can make use of India to check China. Of course, India is not happy about being used as a tool of the US’s check against China. India intends to maintain good relations with both the US and China. At this point, India is different from Japan. India has mapped out a strategy to secure its independent diplomacy capability, while Japan tries to become closer with the US, ready for conflicts with China.”

-Why do you think Japan does not give up visiting the Yasukuni Shrine and the distortion of its history text books despite opposition from Korea and China?

“Japan is suffering from an “existential crisis.” Japan has been continuously admiring the West since the Meiji Restoration. The opinion of its Asian neighboring countries has not been so important to Japan. Until now, such a strategy of Japan had been successful. With the advent of a “century of Asia”, the time has come for Japan to make a fundamental decision on whether to become a member of the West club or that of Asia.

-On which grounds can you say now is a century of Asia?

“According to political researcher Francis Fukuyama, with the collapse of the Cold War, the “end of history” has come where the western values eventually win. However, I would rather say that a “return of history” is being made. The population of western countries is less than a tenth of the world’s total population. Three out of the four countries who will become the world economic powers in 2050 (China, the US, India and Japan) are from Asia. Countries who have been in longstanding unfriendly relations such as China-India, China-Vietnam and India-Pakistan have been switching their direction toward a reconciliation mood. The central axis of world history has been returning to Asia for more than 500 years.”

-Do you think that we can view the Hallyu (Korean Wave) that sweeps over Asia from this point of view?

“I think that the Hallyu reveals a section of the “Asian Renaissance.” I had learned the English history and the works of Shakespeare in school, not the

history of China or Asia. Young people are more familiar with the culture of Asia or their own countries rather than the image of the West.”

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■ Lee Kuan Yew’s “MPH leadership” from Mahbubani’s view

“An eternal mentor who led growth by meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty”

Singaporeans have special affection for their first PM Lee Kuan Yew who had transformed Singapore into a “first country.” Dean Mahbubani called him a “mentor” a few times during the interview. Lee Kuan Yew is still serving in the Cabinet of Singapore as Minister Mentor. When asked about the key to the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, Mahbubani started talking about his personal story.

“Let’s think about the fact that I had served as the Singapore Ambassador to the UN twice even though I am from a minority of minorities. It would be almost impossible for other Asian countries to even imagine this.”

He is from the Sindhi, an extreme minority which accounts for less than 0.25% of Singapore’s population. Dean Mahbubani took the ‘MPH’ theory to explain how he could be nurtured to become a representative diplomat of Singapore. MPH is frequently used in English as the abbreviation stands for “Miles per Hour.” However, Mahbubani’s MPH stands for Meritocracy, Pragmatism and Honesty, which are the three key factors of Lee Kuan Yew’s leadership.

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●Profile of Kishore Mahbubani

Born in 1949

Graduated from National University of Singapore with a degree in Philosophy, 1970

Master degree in Philosophy from Dalhousie University, Canada, 1976

1982-1984: Served in the Embassy of Singapore in the US as Deputy Head of Mission

1985-1989: Ambassador of Singapore to the United Nations (1st)

1991-1992: A fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University

1998-2003: Ambassador of Singapore to the United Nations (2nd)

Feb 01 & May 02: President of the UN Security Council

2004 to date: Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore

PUBLICATIONS:

Can Asians Think? (1999, not published in Korean yet)

Beyond the Age of Innocence (2005, not published in Korean yet)

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