

## 'From NY to New Delhi, it's like going from a funeral to a wedding'

Deep K Datta-Ray, Jan 12, 2011, 12.00am IST

In [New Delhi](#) for a meeting of the Prime Minister's Global Council of Overseas Indians, **Kishore Mahbubani** , dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School in Singapore, spoke to **Deep K Datta-Ray** .

### How should [India](#) negotiate its geopolitical milieu?

This is India's greatest opportunity in 300 years and geopolitics should not get in the way. I'll use an analogy. In 1999, the US bombed the Chinese embassy in [Belgrade](#). It was a mistake, say 80% of Americans i speak to but absolutely every Chinese person says it was premeditated since the only area bombed was the top-secret communications room. The Chinese were furious. Yet, they didn't respond in kind. They swallowed their pride because time is on their side. They will settle all scores, but when they are strong. Similarly, it is in India's interest to bide its time, remain calm, not get distracted by geopolitics and instead focus on your core strengths. India has the advantage even on [China](#) because you have a young population. Put aside the border for now, engage China, take advantage of their competencies. Another advantage you have over China is that you have smaller neighbours. China has to deal with equally powerful, if not more powerful neighbours, [Russia](#), Japan, you and of course the [United States](#).

### What might help or prevent India from arriving as it were?

Let's compare with China again. They began reforms in 1979 and their third decade was the best in terms of growth. India began reforms in 1991. Now you are beginning your third decade of growth and it looks like growth will be at least 9%. The best is yet to come! A large part of this is in people's attitude. Indians are highly optimistic. It makes for dynamism and a keenness to do more. International investors like to put their money in an optimistic nation. Travelling from [New York](#) to New Delhi, is like going from a funeral to a wedding. But i'm always surprised at how Indians see their own glass as half empty, that you are geopolitically disadvantaged, while the rest of the world sees you as full of opportunity. That is why FDI has grown so dramatically. This attitude has to be sustained and nurtured. India's core strength is its economy and the government has to focus on it. There is already so much happening.

### What about the contention that India is simply coasting along on the 1991 reforms, that much more reform is required?

Certainly much more must be done. But I'm saying that there is a great deal happening economically. Much more has to be done in terms of infrastructure development because that is what attracts investors. [Singapore](#) was able to become the Asian hub for many international companies because we provided the infrastructure. India should also go all out to improve healthcare and education. These are the basics for high growth, to maintain the momentum that so much of the world is envious of.

### How can Singapore help India maintain the momentum?

Singapore believes in India and will invest much more. My school believes that the economies that do the best are the ones that can balance the invisible hand of the market with the very visible hand of good governance. That is where Singapore excelled and my school tries to transfer these skills, this approach from the Singaporean experience to Asian civil servants. That is why we give such generous scholarships to civil servants from around the world to come and study in Singapore. And here the best students are Indians and Chinese, if i were to admit the class on merit, it would be divided between Indians and Chinese.

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