

Wake up, America! You're falling behind

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Editor's Note: The following is an edited portion of an interview with **Kishore Mahbubani**, the Dean of the **Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy** at the National University of Singapore. Mahbubani previously served for 33 years in Singapore's diplomatic service and is the author of **The New Asian Hemisphere, Can Asians Think?** and **Beyond the Age of Innocence**.

Every time the United States or the West steps into an Islamic country it presents a major geopolitical gift to China. (When the U.S. decided to intervene in Libya) China was privately saying, "Great, go ahead! Go into more Islamic countries. Make my day."

If you're a logical, long-term, hard-headed geopolitical realist thinker from America it is very, very clear that the only country that can overtake the United States in absolute power - militarily, economically, in every sense - is China.

The Islamic world will not overtake America— not in my lifetime and not in your lifetime. So America should be devoting 90% of its resources on managing China and 10% of its resources on managing the Islamic world.

Instead it is spending 90% of its resources getting involved in the Islamic world - whether it is Iraq or Afghanistan or Palestine or Libya— and 10% of its time managing China. In so doing, America is revealing its geopolitical incompetence

The U.S. should engage China more seriously and try to work out a long-term, viable, geopolitical partnership with China. It should also give up its dream of **achieving democracy in China**. It should stop believing that a "Jasmine Revolution" is on the way and realize that this government in China is going to survive and possibly do very well.

You may wish for all kinds of worst-case scenarios for China, but as a geopolitical planner you should plan for the best-case scenario.

China is going to go from strength to strength. And if China is going to go from strength to strength and you spend all your time either in the Islamic world or having this **absolutely ignorant domestic debate** about how to cut the deficit, you're just buying time for China.

A lot of my writings are intended to serve as a wake-up call to the West. I'm not anti-West nor am I anti-American - even though many people think I am. I'm actually just telling the West that you are acting against your own long-term geopolitical and economic interests in your policies towards the rest of the world. There was a time - and it lasted only 200 years - when the West could make decisions and the rest of the world had to comply. That era is gone, finished - poof!

Now the West has got to learn to **understand what the rest of the world** wants and pragmatically adjust. The biggest advantage that Asian countries have over the United States and other Western countries is that they're very pragmatic and flexible and America has become ideological and dogmatic. America needs to become pragmatic and flexible too.

Unfortunately, American public intellectuals have an incestuous, **self-referential and self-congratulatory discourse** among themselves saying, "Aren't we the greatest in the world? Gee, aren't we wonderful?" And they don't realize that Western power - including American power - is receding steadily in the world.

Look at Southeast Asia. After the U.S. won the Cold War, (Southeast Asia) was frankly an American lake. And then suddenly Americans became very arrogant after winning the Cold War and they said, "Hey, we don't need the world; forget you."

With a slow, pragmatic and often wise approach, China is advancing steadily in the world. I admire what the Chinese have done. It's amazing how careful, deliberate, and systematic they are in their policies towards the rest of the world and how arrogant and ignorant American policies are.

If you want to learn about how to grow a country's economy right now, please don't go to Europe, don't go to America; go to Asia. Frankly, the **best governed country in the world** - and I can say this somewhat immodestly - is Singapore.

Or even go to China.

Let me give you a very simple example. The most shocking thing I've learned recently for someone who lived in New York for 10 and a half years is that the Tappan Zee Bridge which carries thousands of cars can only survive another 10 years. Isn't that shocking? In the meantime, while you can't hold up one bridge across one river, guess what, China is building the world's fastest trains and the world's best airports.

I've flown several times, just by chance, directly from Shanghai to JFK (airport in New York). And when you fly from Shanghai airport to JFK, you're flying from the first world to the third world. And yet Americans are not aware of how far they've fallen behind. The Americans cannot conceive of the idea that you can learn about governance from the rest of the world. China can and China does. China spends so much time studying best practices in the rest of the world and America spends no time studying best practices in the rest of the world.

So my message to America is that the clock is ticking. Time is no more on your side. And fortunately even today there are huge reservoirs of goodwill towards America in the world. Try to figure out how you can use these reservoirs of goodwill for the long-term benefit of America. Don't waste them.