The West in an Asian Century

KISHORE MAHBUBANI is a distinguished former diplomat and scholar from Singapore. *The Economist* calls him 'an Asian Toynbee', preoccupied with the rise and fall of civilisations. The *Washington Post* dubbed him 'the Max Weber of the "Confucian Ethic"' after he sparked the Asian values debate of the 1990s with his provocative essay 'The West and the Rest'. The author of *Can Asians Think?* (1998) and, most recently, *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World* (2005), he also contributes regularly to leading journals such as *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*.

Mr Mahbubani served with the Singapore Foreign Service for 33 years, including two terms as Singapore's Ambassador to the United Nation (1998-2004). During this period he presided over the UN Security Council in January 2001 and May 2002. He is currently Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

SUSAN WINDYBANK caught up with him on a recent visit to Australia.

Susan Windybank: What is the main message you would like to give Australians as they contemplate their future in a fast-changing region and watch the apparent rise to superpower status of China and India?

Kishore Mahbubani: If there is one simple, over-riding message I would like to give it is this: The Asian century is not coming. The Asian century is here. It has begun. And it has begun primarily because of a huge rebirth of cultural confidence among Asian societies. After having slept for centuries, Asian societies are waking up and recognising that their time has come to succeed. By the year 2050, projections indicate that three of the four largest economies in the world will be Asian: number one will be China, number two the United States, number three India and number four Japan.

SW: The Pacific or Asian century has been much heralded in the past, but ended in tears with the 1997 Asian financial crisis. How can you be so sure its time has come?

KM: While I speak optimistically about the rise and success of Asia, it's clear there will be problems also. I don't see history moving in one straight line. But Asian countries have already seen several crises such as the financial crisis and the SARS crisis. They survived these crises and moved on. The fact that they did so shows there is some resilience that is driving Asian countries forward. So while there will be future crises, I'm confident that Asian countries will be able to handle them.

The most critical element for success is that people have to believe that they can succeed. The growing confidence amongst young Asians confirms that the Asian century has arrived. The current generation can see that the future will not only be better for them but better for their children too. This is a whole new mindset in Asia.

SW: What are the implications of this cultural confidence and economic success for the West, which is used to being dominant?

KM: I argue that what we have today is an unnatural situation. The total population of the West, if you combine North America and Western Europe, may come to 700 million. That's about 12% of the world's population. This 12% cannot remain the dominant civilisation, making all the big decisions, deciding the values for global society, and so forth. It's time for other civilisations to play an equally important role. And you can't stop it anyway. You can't take civilisations like the Chinese or Islamic civilisations which have thousands of years of history and ask them to become cultural replicas of the West. As they grow and develop they will develop their own distinctive identities. That's why I argue for a fusion of civilisations, not a clash of civilisations. When the East and West come together happily, there will be new sparks of creativity.

Bridging the Islamic divide

SW: In your latest book you suggest that China can help the United States in its relations with the Islamic world because there is no bad blood or historical baggage between the Sino and Islamic civilisations like there is between the West and the Islamic world. Do you expect this suggestion to be taken up?

KM: Many Muslim intellectuals are thinking hard about how their societies can succeed and develop. But if they were to suggest to their populations that they could succeed by becoming carbon copies of the West, they would encounter a lot of resistance. On the other hand, if they went to their populations and asked them to consider the Chinese model, then I think a lot of Muslims would listen. China and the Islamic world have had good relations for centuries. There is a lot of natural empathy for China. And if other Islamic countries performed the way China is performing economically, it would be hugely beneficial for the rest of the world. You would have Muslim populations focusing on economic development and not trying to join the ranks of Osama bin Laden.

SW: What role can the West play? You argue that the West has not shared the successful policies of modernisation with the Islamic world. Doesn't this simply reinforce a victim mentality—that the poor performance of Islamic societies (primarily Arabic) is someone else's fault, that the West stole the great Islamic heritage, and so on? Isn't the real question whether Islam itself can modernise?

KM: Yes, but it's also important for the West to ask questions of its own role. One of the most provocative points I make in my book is that the West has been quietly smug about the failure of Islamic societies. The West felt good about this because Islamic civilisation was once considered a threat. The disadvantage, however, of having Islamic societies so far behind in a small and shrinking globalised world is that their problems become our problems. So it was very short-sighted of the West not to try and promote the same kind of economic development as it did with, say, Japan and other countries.

I believe it's in the West's interests to come up with some kind of Marshall Plan for developing the Islamic world. This would not necessarily involve massive resources but exposure to trade and economic flows. The West should also make a big effort to promote investment in Islamic countries and then see what happens.

SW: What about Muslim Southeast Asia? You have pointed out that the West has failed to notice the Arabisation of Muslim Southeast Asia over the past 30 years, yet this is where many hope reform and modernisation of Islam will come from.

KM: I think the Arabisation of Southeast Asia is something we should all be concerned about because some of the more radical features of Islam are starting to dislodge the more enlightened features. This is not a positive trend. Australia is located next to the most populous Islamic country in the world, Indonesia. This proximity gives you an understanding of trends in the Islamic world. Australia should try to share this understanding with Washington. We do not want a situation where Southeast Asian Muslims begin to feel as alienated from America as some in the Middle East do.

Traditionally, Muslim Southeast Asians have assumed that the Islamic heartland is in the Arab world. But if the Muslim societies of Southeast Asia succeed and do better economically than Arabic/Islamic societies, then it increases the potential that young Arabs will come and ask what they can learn from Southeast Asian Muslim societies.

SW: American President George W. Bush believes democracy is the solution to Islamic extremism. Does this risk putting the political cart before the economic horse? And what happens if radical Islamic parties come to power through the ballot box—what Samuel Huntington calls the 'democratic paradox'?

KM: There's no doubt that as societies develop they will have to become more democratic. There's no other alternative destination whatsoever.

SW: So Fukuyama's right?

KM: Yes, ultimately. The question is how do you get there? Can you do it overnight? At the end of the Cold War there was a triumphalist mood in the West. This was captured by Francis Fukuyama's essay the 'end of history' in which he seems to suggest that if the whole world became carbon copies of the West we would reach nirvana. The lesson of the 1990s is that if your society is not ready for political transition to democracy, then you can go through a lot of grief. Just compare China and Russia. Russia put glasnost before perestroika and China put perestroika before glasnost. Many of my Russian friends believe that China took the right road. So it's not a question of whether or not we want democracy but how to get there in a way that remains stable for the long run.

I also agree with Samuel Huntington that, for example, if you had free elections in Saudi Arabia today the royal family would not be returned to power. It's more than likely that a much more radical party would win office because a large part of the population feels angry and alienated.

SW: The extremists might win office, but would they stay in office? If they don't deliver the goods, won't they get kicked out by the voters?

KM: This is where what has happened in Iran is in some ways a lesson for all of us. When you have a radical group that takes office, it's very difficult to change it. As you know, the population of Iran has been voting consistently for a much more moderate government. It would be better for the developing world to take the East Asian path to development by promoting economic growth, developing a stable middle class and then proceeding to greater democratisation. It doesn't have to be an overnight thing. You can have progressive development of democratic norms and democratic culture in a society.

Avoiding a Sino-American divide

SW: Two main trends are now shaping the future of the Asia Pacific region: one is increasing economic integration centred around China, to be given organisational form and structure by the East Asian Summit; the other is closer political and strategic ties between America, Australia and Japan. Commentators here are becoming increasingly nervous about the tension between these two trends. How serious do you think this tension is?

KM: Any kind of rift down the middle of the Pacific would be very bad for the region, very bad for Australia and very bad even for Singapore. We all have a common interest in preventing it. If, say, five years from now, a Cold War breaks out between America and China we will all be put in very uncomfortable positions and we will all face difficult choices and decisions.

There are already some indications that such an unhappy scenario may unfold. If you look at the moves that the United States is making with Japan and India you get a sense of a containment strategy being developed as we speak. In response, China is preparing its own options to prevent such a containment taking place. If you look, for example, at the Free Trade Agreement that China has proposed to the 10 ASEAN nations, the primary goal is not just trade. The goal is to give ASEAN nations a stake in China's prosperity so that there is no reason for them to join a containment strategy against China. The fact that both sides are making such moves already in this complex chess game indicates that such an unhappy outcome cannot be ruled out.

One huge uncertainty is whether America will play by the rules of the game that it created at the end of World War II. (By the way, these rules were a reversal of the European world order in which, when countries became powerful, they colonised and dominated and did not allow potential rivals to emerge.) Much will depend on whether the United States tries to prevent the rise of China by deciding that the 1945 rules no longer apply. The decision to implicitly veto the acquisition by the Chinese government owned oil company CNOOC of the American oil company UNICAL was a clear sign that the rules are being changed. So America is sending conflicting signals. These signals are casting a shadow over the region.

SW: There seems to be growing acceptance in both Washington and Beijing that deeper and deeper competition is inevitable.

KM: At the moment it's still avoidable. Schools of thought on both sides are preparing themselves for worst-case scenarios. I think it's dangerous to allow ourselves to become prisoners of worst-case scenarios. If you prepare only for the worst, it sometimes happens. It's better to work towards best-case scenarios.

SW: What would a best-case scenario look like?

KM: It would be one in which the United States and China work together. In the cultural sphere, there would be a fusion of civilisations in which the best of the East and the best of the West come together and the two societies realise that by working together they can create a remarkably bright future for themselves and for mankind. You can see this already happening if you look at the economic front where trade is growing (despite difficulties in some areas). This could develop into a very deep engagement, like that between Europe and America or Japan and America, where there is disagreement on some economic policies but agreement on the rules of the game.

One reason this happy scenario might come about is because America created the rules of world order in 1945 that allowed countries to grow and succeed—provided they complied with the rules of the game, the UN charter rules, and did not engage in military expansion. This is how Japan and Germany re-emerged as major powers, and this is how China could emerge as a major civilian power that has a cooperative relationship with the United States. (Under this scenario, by the way, the China/Taiwan situation is controlled.)

One indication that such a happy scenario might emerge is given by the East Asian Summit in Kuala Lumpur. For the first time brings together not just the Southeast Asian countries, not just the East Asian countries, but also India, Australia and New Zealand. That indicates that a new political geography is emerging in the region—of countries coming together and not pulling apart.

I hope for all our sakes that we can work towards a happy outcome.

SW: Let's end on that optimistic note. Kishore, thank you very much for speaking with me.