



## TRANSCRIPT

### SHARED DESTINIES: AMERICA, ASIA AND AUSTRALIA

By Kishore Mahbubani

On 7 May, 2005

America, Asia and Australia will have shared destinies. Geography dictates this: all three continents border the Pacific Ocean. Globalization will bring us together even closer. There has been an explosive growth of trade and investment across the Pacific. People and goods are moving between all three continents in greater numbers. Our lives have become intertwined.

While our destinies will be shared, it is unclear whether we will share happy or unhappy destinies. Throughout the later decades of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, there seemed to be a great sense of optimism about the future of the Asia-Pacific region. I recall at the conclusion of the Bogor agreement between APEC leaders on free trade in November 1994, former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating called the accord “the start of the Pacific century.” Many of us shared that optimism. In September 1994, speaking at the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in Vancouver B.C, I tried to express these expectations of a new Pacific community. This is what I said:

There has never been anything like a Pacific community before. Hence, those who try to discern the future of the Pacific from its past will be blind to its possibilities. It will be unlike anything that existed before because it will be neither an Asian community nor an American community. The Pacific has the potential to become the most dynamic region in the world because it can bring together the best from several streams of rich civilizations in Asia and the West, and if the fusion works, the creativity could be on a scale never seen or experienced before.



## TRANSCRIPT

Those were happy days. Eleven years have passed. Much has happened and much has surfaced. It is now no longer clear that we are destined toward such happy outcomes. Indeed, I fear that we are just as likely to have an unhappy divide down the middle of the Pacific. If such a divide occurs, Australia will be torn in many ways. For example, it could be torn between its cultural roots in the West (including its close ties with America) and its geographical location. This is not a hypothetical dilemma. I recall that there were some diplomatic exchanges following some remarks made by Foreign Minister Downer in August 2004 over Australia's stand in the case of a conflict over Taiwan. Foreign Minister Downer said that that Australia would not automatically back Washington in a war with China over Taiwan. There was an immediate response from the US State Department which reminded Australia of its clear obligations under the ANZUS treaty.

To try to forestall such unhappy outcomes, we have to act now. We need to thoroughly analyze all the dimensions of this issue to figure what needs to be done. There are several questions that I propose to address. First, what were the factors that seemed to be driving us towards a happy Pacific community in the 1980s and early 1990s? Second, what caused the big change? Third, how are we likely to see these great divides emerging? Fourth, what can and should we do about this? I believe that it is still possible to bring about happy shared destinies for America, Asia and Australia. This is why I wrote my book "Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust between America and the World." In my remarks today, I will be using some of the arguments I made in the book.

First, what were the factors that appeared to be paving the way for a happy Pacific community? There were several. Essentially, they arose out of the benevolent role America played as a great power in the Cold War. Some of the reasons for the benevolence were due



## TRANSCRIPT

to an effort to compete with the Soviet Union to win hearts and minds in the world. But some of it was a natural outgrowth of the nature of American society. For example, America did not share the American dream with young Asians as a cunning geopolitical move. It happened as a result of the shrinking of the world. And when it happened, it fundamentally changed the grain of many Asian societies where hitherto, destiny had been determined at birth. Similarly, America opened its universities to millions of Asian students out of the traditional generosity of the American spirit. But the millions of returned students have also transformed Asian societies.

For most of mankind through most of history, birth was destiny, especially for the very poor. When Europe began to liberate itself from the Dickensian conditions of the industrial revolution, it was one of the earliest social experiments to bring hope to and better living conditions of the poorest. But Europe never captured the world's imagination with its story. America did. It did this because America was probably the first major society to demonstrate that a totally non-feudal order could be built: almost from the very beginning (apart from the slaves), American society had no class barriers. Instead, with each passing generation there were more and more success stories among the very poor. To make it against great odds was part of the American dream.

This American dream is essentially the magical star dust that America has sprinkled into the eyes of many of the poor around the world. America did not intend to do this. Most Americans believe that this American dream has been confined to American shores. But as the world shrank, and as American TV became ubiquitous, along with Pepsi and Seven-Up, McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, the American way of life became known



## TRANSCRIPT

to billions. The poor were astute enough to see America's greatest strength: that it had created a social order where even the very poor had an opportunity to advance.

American society has given a new confidence not only to the poor, but to all sorts of nationalities, religions, and other groups as well. America has shown the world that any human can succeed. One of the best contemporary examples of this is Arnold Schwarzenegger's journey from being a "lower-middle-class boy in the bland town of Graz [Austria] to governor of California." His story provides hope to all lower-middle-class boys, not just Austrians. "Mr. Schwarzenegger's victory is seen as a signal to the world: look here, we too are somebody." Similarly, the stories of countless other successful American immigrants carry messages of hope to their nations, messages that are having a great effect on the world population.

This sense that America is the society which provides the most hope to its citizens and immigrants has now been confirmed by a survey done by the Pew Research Center in 2002. It polled 38,000 people in 44 countries and asked whether "success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control." The largest percentage of any population to disagree with this statement was the American population when 65% disagreed, more than double the percentage in old world countries like Italy and Germany, and triple that of India, Turkey and Pakistan. Professor Alan Brinkley of Columbia University has said: "Americans have always had a stronger belief in the ability of the individual than reality would support. The key is the idea of social mobility, the Horatio Alger vision. There's enough truth to that idea for it to survive, but never as much social mobility as the myth suggests." Often however myth is more important than reality. The rest of the world has



## TRANSCRIPT

bought the American myth that the best place in the world for any individual to succeed is America.

I have had the good fortune of traveling to most corners of the globe, including to some of the poorest cities. I have seen people living in miniscule tin shacks among thousands in close proximity. Their living conditions must be terrible. Yet, floating above the sea of tin roofs would be dozens of satellite dishes, each linked to many homes. I have seen this in Asia and in Africa. And when I speak to my guides or my drivers during these visits and ask them what is their greatest aspiration, more often than not the answer would be "I would love to go to America". If I asked why, the answer inevitably would be something along the lines: "If I get to America, I will have a chance to succeed."

A more critical decision was made by America at the end of World War II: to create a multilateral order which would allow just not America but other nations to also grow and thrive. It worked. Germany and Japan emerged from ashes to become major powers without causing conflict. And for a while it looked as though the world was destined to happy futures, as long as all countries played by the rules of the 1945 order fashioned by America.

Then came the end of the Cold War. This in my view caused a big change in America's relations with the world. America did not try to harm the world. Instead, it began a process of disengagement from many corners of the world. There were no malevolent intentions. Nor, however, was any serious thought given to the consequences of sudden disengagement with critical corners of the world. All this led to a growing divide between America and Islamic world, and America and China, two divides which now also affect the future of America, Asia and Australia.



## TRANSCRIPT

The current divide between America and the Islamic world is unnecessary. America did not colonize the Islamic world, Europe did. Indeed, America encouraged decolonization and even stood with Egypt in the 1956 Suez crisis. Most Muslims then had a positive view of America. In the Cold War, America stood shoulder to shoulder with the Islamic Mujahedin when they fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. America encouraged the emergence of Islamic solidarity. Unfortunately, when the war ended, America walked away from Afghanistan and its erstwhile allies, leaving behind a cauldron that allowed the emergence of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida. Those who want to trace the roots of 9/11 should go back and study what went wrong in Afghanistan and America's role there. It is a fact that attitudes towards America in the Islamic world progressively darkened in the 1990s. This was also a result of larger mistakes made by the West in the Islamic world.

The first strategic mistake made by the West was to assume that its long-term interests were best served by a world in which Islamic states were mired in poverty and backwardness. The second strategic mistake, which flowed from the first, was a policy — never articulated, perhaps never conscious, but nevertheless very real — not to share the successful policies of modernization with the Islamic world. The United States had a Marshall Plan to develop Europe after World War II — even a plan to develop Japan. The obvious question is why no such grand plan was devised for the Islamic world — or even for a few Islamic societies. Was it a result of pure ignorance of the need for one — or of a calculation that the Islamic world was better off non-modernized? Historians will probably debate this for centuries. I have no doubt that Western and Islamic historians will reach opposite conclusions.



## TRANSCRIPT

A third strategic mistake was to not see the huge importance of encouraging the success of Muslim moderates in Islamic societies. Many bright Western-educated Muslim minds are troubled by the poverty and backwardness of the Islamic world. And they do not subscribe to the radical agenda of Osama bin Laden. Many of these Muslim moderates want their societies to be economically and politically compatible with the West, while remaining in social and spiritual terms true to their Islamic heritage. In short, they want to trigger both the equivalent of a renaissance and a rationalist enlightened movement in the Islamic world. They would make ideal partners of the West. But the West has not helped them. Instead, the West has in recent decades helped those who suppress them.

The fourth strategic mistake of the West was not to consciously promote the spread of modern secular education in Islamic societies. Instead, the West looked away — or even quietly winked approval — when \$300 million per year of private Saudi money went into establishing Wahabi-influenced madrassahs, which fostered medieval fundamentalism, not modernity. These madrassahs, quietly established in states that had supported the West in the Cold War, like Pakistan and Indonesia, have provided a ready pool of recruits for Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. It takes an enormous effort to take a mind already steeped in 10 years of Wahabi education and re-educate it in the ways of the Modern world.

The fifth strategic mistake made by the West was to implement economic policies that brought short-term electoral benefits to the democratically elected leaders in Western societies — but came at the expense of long-term damage to Islamic societies.

Any number of examples prove the point. Take one. After 9/11, President Musharraf and his country, Pakistan, immediately became key allies in the battle against Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Not long after 9/11, he came to Washington, D.C. — to seal this



## TRANSCRIPT

strategic partnership and friendship. To survive politically at home against the Islamic extremist parties, Musharraf — like a good Western politician — had to deliver economic benefits. He sought only economic concessions from America, primarily a bigger textile quota to get more jobs in Pakistan. America turned him down. The few voters of North Carolina who were textile workers were more important than the larger national interest of America in helping Musharaff survive politically.

Australians know well the implications of a divide between America and the Islamic world. Australians have become victims too. 10/12 happened in Bali exactly one year, one month, one day later than 9/11. Roger Cohen, in an article in the International Herald Tribune on May 4<sup>th</sup> 2005, quoted Sholeh Ibrahim, an Islamic teacher from the central Java city of Solo, who said: “I am angry with your President Bush, who sees Islam as an enemy ... the Bali bombing was a justified reaction by Muslims to American policies.” Cohen struggles with the notion that a man entrusted with the malleable minds of youth should see in the 202 people killed by the Bali nightclub bombings an act justified by what he sees as greater American outrages in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

Indeed, Singaporeans almost became victims too if Singapore had not nipped in the bud a plot to set off seven Oklahoma City-type explosions in 2001 and 2002. Both Australia and Singapore understand that if a divide occurs between America and the Islamic world, we are not bystanders. We are involved, especially since Muslims make up the largest single religious community within Southeast Asia. The obvious question therefore facing Australia is: what can Australia do to reduce this divide?

An equally difficult divide is emerging between American and Chinese societies. Again, this divide was not necessary. After the Kissinger and Nixon visits to China, China

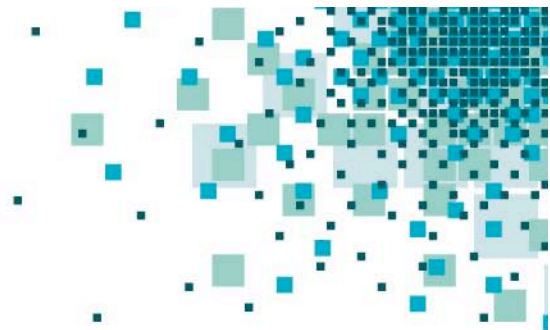


## TRANSCRIPT

effectively joined America's camp in the Cold War (even though China's human rights record in the 1970s and 1980s was clearly worse than it is today). Deng Xiaoping unleashed the entrepreneurial energies of the Chinese population by showing them on TV how well America had advanced under capitalism. This shattered the myth of the superiority of the Communist economic system. After Deng's visit to USA, hundreds of thousands of Chinese students have studied in America. Many have returned to fuel the gigantic economic explosion in China. Against the backdrop, it would have been equally natural for China to emerge as a modern economic power with a population bearing an enormous reservoir of goodwill towards America.

Instead, sadly, the opposite has happened. There is now deep distrust in China of American intentions. One incident illustrates this well. In May 1999, an American plane bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. 95% of Americans believe that it was an accident. Virtually 100% of the Chinese I have spoken to believe that it was deliberate. The story of why this divide has emerged between China and America is a complicated one. It began with Tiananmen but it has continued. Hence, even though government-to-government relations go through ups and downs, the trend in society-to-society relations seems to be steadily negative.

The first source of misunderstanding between America and China will derive from their different historical experiences. America, too, is culture-bound. It looks at the future through the prism of its own history. Since it emerged on the world stage, all the geopolitical rules of engagement and conflict between naval or friendly powers were set by European thinkers. World War I, World War II and the Cold War were essentially Western geopolitical games, even though some of the players, like Japan, were non-Western.



## TRANSCRIPT

Hard headed American thinkers, especially those who belong to the culturally dominant “realist” school of strategic thinkers, will scoff at the suggestion that cultural recognition as number one can satisfactorily replace military dominance. These thinkers are culturally programmed to believe that China will behave like a normal European power and engage in a military, not a cultural or political, race with America. And since many of these thinkers have dominated American policymaking in recent decades, they have planted in many key American institutions an ingrained tendency to see China as the real big “threat”: namely that when China succeeds it will engage in a major military contest with America. Hence, in some of these circles, there is an understandable desire to plot and plan ways and means of tripping China up before it become a rival military power to the US (including plans to push for greater democracy in Hong Kong and Taiwan to embarrass or spread political ferment in the Chinese Mainland).

One of the most dangerous dimensions of American policy towards China is the strongly held belief among key American strategic thinkers that China would benefit enormously if it could be transformed into a democracy. The sooner, the better. A natural corollary of this belief is that anything that the US can do either to plant the seeds of democracy or allow the emergence of pro-democratic forces would therefore only benefit China. It is almost impossible to shake this conviction from American minds because it plays to the rhetoric that the reason America has become the most successful society in the history of man is because it has the most democratic society in the world. This may be true for America. Even though America is probably the youngest nation among all the great powers, American thinkers believe that their openness is a universal panacea. If they could



## TRANSCRIPT

rid China of its “oppressive” Communist Party rule, China would grow and flourish after the forces of freedom had taken over.

However, it is inherently difficult for the American mind to conceive that non-democratic rule of China has worked – perhaps better than a premature democracy ever could have. Americans fervently believe that democracy is the best possible form of government, both for ideological and for pragmatic reasons. Apart from the strong sense of ownership of the society that is generated in any citizenry that is allowed to both select and remove its rulers, democracy is also extremely functional because it provides a ready “flushing” mechanism to remove any incompetent, corrupt or unpopular leaders. This explains the energy and vitality of the American ruling elite. Every four or eight years, a new team arrives in the capital to provide fresh leadership, ideas and direction. No other capital in the world, not even those of other developed Western countries, enjoy the same degree of renewal and revitalization of its ruling elite.

But a sudden end to Communist Party rule in China at this point in history would prove even more disastrous and painful, both for the people of China, the people of the region and indeed the world as a whole. There are strong populist and nationalist forces within the Chinese political fabric. They are carefully controlled and managed by the skilled political leadership of the CPC. If these populist forces were ever unleashed, the nationalism that might emerge and confront the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may well be angrier and more difficult to manage. Hence, the CPC may well be doing the world an enormous favor by managing the gradual but positive transformation of Chinese society and steering it in the direction of integrating with the new globalized society as a responsible



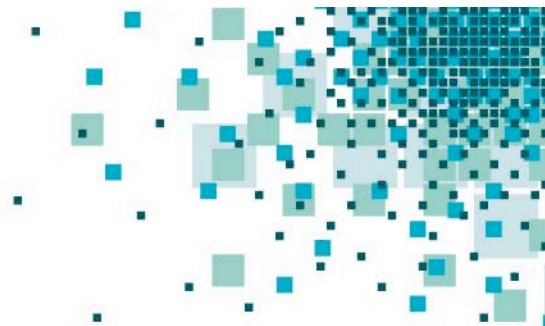
## TRANSCRIPT

citizen. The whole world has a vested interest in the success of this great Chinese experiment. America must become a constructive, not antagonistic, stakeholder in it.

Just as Southeast Asia and Australia cannot be bystanders in any divide between America and Islam, so too we cannot be bystanders in any divide between American and Chinese societies. We will all be torn if America and China eventually engage in a major geopolitical contest. But this contest is not inevitable. It can be avoided.

America and China need to reach a major new understanding. America should signal that it welcomes and not fears or dreads China's emergence as a new economic and political power. China should signal that as it emerges as a new economic and political power, it will play by the rules of 1945 that allowed its emergence and become, like Germany and Japan, supporters of this multilateral order. Both sides should make a firm commitment not to unilaterally change the status quo in Taiwan, a status quo which both accept today.

I firmly believe that all these great divides can be avoided. There are still some relatively painless solutions. First, America should indicate that it remains firmly committed to the 1945 multilateral order which has enough built-in flexibility to allow the emergence of new powers (except of course for the vexing question of UN Security Council reform). Many societies doubt America's commitment. The difficulty is to convince American society of the virtues of this American inspired multilateral order. Second, America must become more aware of the consequences of its actions upon the rest of the world. It must work harder to convince the Islamic world that it also cares about the loss of Muslim lives. The Middle East Peace Process must be energized. Third, America should continue to make the world a better place by holding up its society as a source of inspiration. America does not



## TRANSCRIPT

need propaganda; the performance of its own society creates genuine admiration for America round the world.

The final question to answer is this: who can deliver these messages effectively to American society. The simple answer is: only friends can. There is a deep reservoir of friendship between America and Australia. American policymakers listen to Australian policymakers. When I first served as Singapore's Ambassador to the UN in the 1980s, the then American Ambassador, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, listened carefully to the then Australian Ambassador to the UN Richard Woolcott on Asia-Pacific issues. The voice of John Dauth, the current Australian Ambassador to the UN, is also well-heeded.

The Chinese, with their usual wisdom, have a wonderful description for the English word, crisis. They convey its meaning with two Chinese characters, danger and opportunity. America's relations with Asia have not reached a crisis. But they may. To avoid this danger, we should seize the opportunity to begin a new chapter in America's relations with Asia. I hope Australia will seize this opportunity.

Word Count: 3907 words