

By Elaina Loveland

## Re-envisioning Asia

An interview with Kishore Mahbubani, dean and professor in the practice of public policy at the National University of Singapore

**K**ISHORE MAHBUBANI IS THE AUTHOR OF *CAN ASIANS THINK?* and *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust between America and the World*. Now the Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, he served with the Singapore Foreign Service from 1971 to 2004. He had postings in Cambodia (where he served during the war in 1973-74), Malaysia, Washington D.C. and New York, where he served two stints as Singapore's ambassador to the UN and as president of the UN Security Council in January 2001 and May 2002. He was permanent secretary at the Foreign Ministry from 1993 to 1998. He holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Singapore. He later earned a master's degree in philosophy from Dalhousie University in Canada, where he also received an honorary doctorate in 1995.

His articles have appeared in a wide range of journals and newspapers, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Washington Quarterly*, *Survival*, *American Interest*, the *National Interest*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*. He has also been profiled in the *Economist* and in *Time* magazine. Mahbubani was granted The Public Administration Medal (Gold) by the Singapore Government in 1998. He was also listed as one of the top 100 public intellectuals in the world by *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines in September 2005.

**IE:** As a career diplomat, how have you seen the relationship with the United States and the rest of the world change over the years? And more specifically, in what ways has Singapore or Asia as a region experienced a change with U.S. relations?

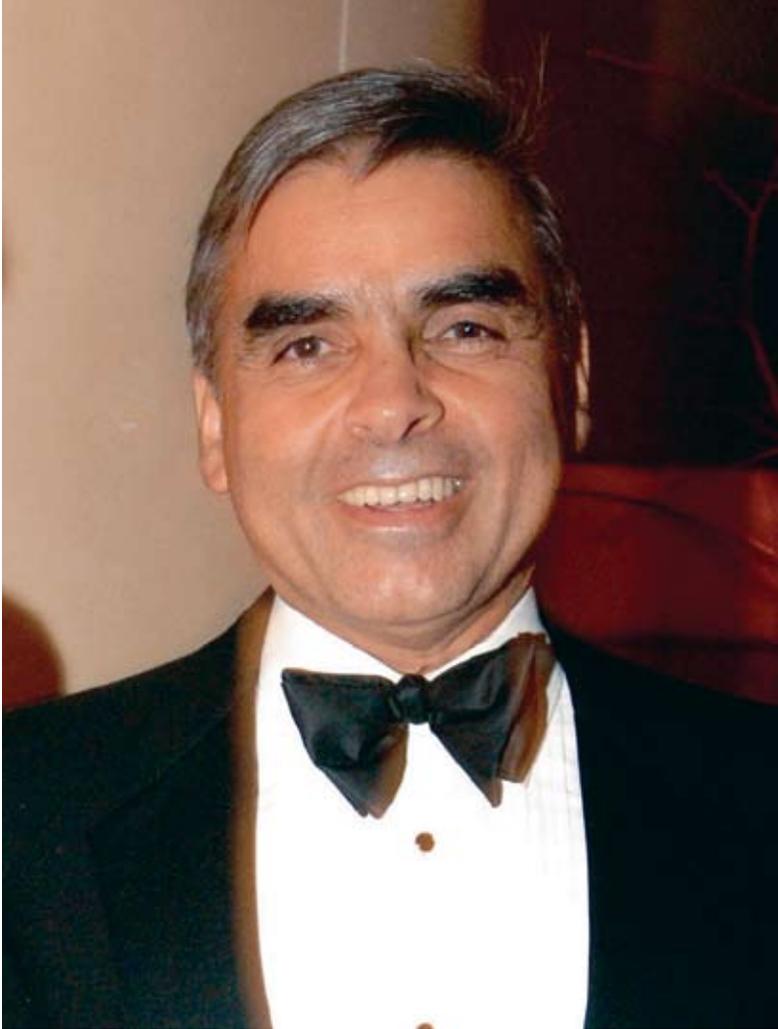
**MAHBUBANI:** Since the end of the Cold War, the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world has been progressively getting worse. It became much worse after September 11, 2001, because after September 11 there was a perception that the United States was acting even more unilaterally.

And several things that the United States did after September 11 damaged its standing and credibility in the world significantly.

However, there are always some paradoxical aspects about any trend. You have a situation where the relations between America and Europe have been quite bad. In some ways, however, the relations between the United States and China and some of the East Asian countries have never been better on the government to government level. This is one paradoxical aspect of the world of today.

**IE:** How is the twenty-first century different than previous centuries and what can colleges and universities throughout the world do to prepare students for these differences?

**MAHBUBANI:** The twenty-first century will be enormously different from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, essentially all the decisions that affected the world were made either in Europe or in North America and world history was driven by decisions made in the West. In the twenty-first century, Asian societies will



Kishore Mahbubani

Kishore Mahbubani will address a plenary session at the NAFSA Annual Conference on June 1, 2007.

regain their natural weight in the world, and by the year 2050, of the four largest economies in the world, three will be Asian. The four largest economies will be, number one, China, number two, the United States, number three, India, and number four, Japan. So in a sense, the center of gravity of the world will move back to Asia, as it was before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Colleges and universities should reevaluate their priorities in light of this historic shift. About a million students study French in the United States and only about 40,000 study Chinese. This is one example of how the languages taught in U.S. schools and colleges are a reflection of priorities of the past and not today's priorities. For a start, U.S. colleges and universities need to inject deeper understanding and a greater study of Asian countries, Asian history, and Asian culture into their curriculum.

**IE:** What is the impact of international education on increasing harmony in the global and almost borderless world in which we live today? How can study abroad positively influence young people in seeing the world differently?

**MAHBUBANI:** International education continues to play a very important role today. If you want to understand why Asia is rising today, a large part of it is due to the large number of Asian students—Chinese students, Japanese students, Indian students—who have studied in North American universities. When they returned home, they have brought back with them skills from the United States. However,

equally important they have brought home with them the positive and optimistic ethos that you find in U.S. society. As a result of this, there is some continuing goodwill toward the United States in Asia.

But at the same time there is another paradox here. The Asian minds trained in the United States have become among the most critical of the United States because they see a huge gap between the values that the United States preaches in its colleges and what it does in the world of today. So you cannot automatically assume that just because someone has studied in the United States that he or she will not be critical of what the United States has done globally. I hope that international education of U.S. students overseas will help to transform U.S. policies toward the rest of the world.

**IE:** You spent a year as a fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University in the early 1990s. How did this shape your view of U.S. higher education?

**MAHBUBANI:** The year that I spent as a fellow at the Harvard Center for International Affairs was one of the most enjoyable and productive years of my life. One of the most enjoyable aspects of being there is because the whole world comes to Harvard University. Every week speakers come to talk from throughout the United States and from the rest of the world—it was a fascinating experience. Also, I realized the quality of the Harvard professors and the quality of the students was quite remarkable.

**IE:** Asia is currently undergoing rapid change. What are the latest developments in the region that the West needs to be most aware of? What do you envision for the future of Asia?

**MAHBUBANI:** There has been a huge boost of psychological confidence in Asia. This is the most optimistic generation of young Asians we've ever seen. It's important for the West to connect with this optimistic generation of young Asians. Asians feel that the West is both working with them to help them succeed but also blocking their growth in some ways. The West is sending contradictory signals towards Asia. On the one hand, several Western principles, including Western free-market economics, have helped the region to grow and thrive. Yet as Asia grows and thrives, the West has been reluctant to accept the rise of Asia and make necessary adjustments to current multilateral institutions. For example, to become the head of the International Monetary Fund, you must be a European and to become the head of the World Bank, you must be a U.S. citizen. That said, 3.5 billion Asians cannot qualify. These sorts of old regulations really upset Asians. They believe that these are relics of the old colonial era and should disappear in the modern world of today.



**Obviously, there are so many examples that show how small and interdependent the world has become. And as more and more interdependent the world becomes, the more we have to understand the process of globalization.”**

**IE:** Today you are a dean in Singapore. With your background dealing with global issues, what unique perspective do you think this brings to your leadership of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy?

**MAHBUBANI:** One big lesson Singapore has learned in public policy education is that we have to deal with globalization. Globalization is the single strongest force that is driving world history today. If you don't understand globalization, you can never, in a sense, be an effective public policy servant. Let me give some examples.

Take health policy. Nowadays, the greatest health challenges you face often come across the border. For instance, SARS started in one small village in China. From this village in China, it jumped to Hong Kong. From Hong Kong, it went simultaneously to two other cities, which are exactly on the opposite side of the world—Toronto and Singapore. Another example is bird flu. It began somewhere in Asia, and it's now affecting the whole world. So, if you try and to have health policies that only take care of what happens within your borders, then you can't protect your society. You have to be aware of challenges that come across the border.

Another example is global warming. There is no way that any country can handle the challenge of global warming on its own. The world must come together to deal with the challenge of global warming.

The third example concerns financial crises. In 1997 there was a financial crisis that began in Thailand. Then it affected Southeast Asia. From Southeast Asia, it hit South Korea. From South Korea, it hit Russia. From Russia, it hit Brazil. And after Brazil, it almost hit the United States.

Obviously, there are so many examples that illustrate how small and interdependent the world has become. And as more and more interdependent the world becomes, the more we have to understand the process of globalization.

In our school of public policy, we have actually set up a center on Asia and globalization because we believe that in the twenty-first century, Asians are going to go from being passengers on the bus of globalization to becoming co-drivers of the bus of globalization. And our center hopes to answer the question, where will Asia drive the bus of globalization to?

**IE:** What are some challenges in the Singaporean higher education system? And what goals does the nation have for educating its college-aged population?

**Mahbubani:** Singapore is very fortunate to have a very good educational system at all levels. For example, in the international science and math tests conducted each year, Singaporean students often come out number one or number two in the world in various tests.

Increasingly, you find plenty of U.S. schools adopting mathematical textbooks that were developed in Singapore. And this is also true of our universities in Singapore. The National University of Singapore was ranked number 19 in the world by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (published in London).

While we have a good system, but even so, our universities continue to face the same challenges as other universities do. The world is changing so fast that it is hard to figure out what skills we should learn and what we should teach in the classroom. We are coming to the conclusion that students should see university education not as the end of their educational career, but as the beginning of it because whatever students learn, they will still need to continue to have lifelong learning. If students don't commit themselves to lifelong learning, their nations will be left behind in new competition created by globalization. We have seen how complacency in this area that has affected many people in Europe. We don't want this complacency to also affect Singapore.

**IE:** International students enroll in classrooms outside of their countries and foreign scholars from many nations visit and conduct research in nations beyond their homeland. What are the advantages of this international knowledge sharing and how do you think these international students and scholars enrich student learning?

**MAHBUBANI:** It is critical in today's educational environment to have students from overseas in college classrooms. Without their presence, students will never fully understand the rest of the world. In our case, in our public policy school, foreign participation is critical. Eighty percent of our students are from overseas. We have the most diverse student body of any school of public policy anywhere in the world. This gives us a huge advantage because when the students begin to compare their experiences, they begin to realize how different their national experience is from other national experiences of their fellow students.

Having international students in classrooms enhances learning. Students begin to understand how decisions made in other countries can also affect their own. We find increasingly that the leading universities in the United States have come to the conclusion that they have to expose their students to the international environment. They're sending them overseas, going abroad. They are having more and more exchange programs.

Our school of public policy here is only two and half years old. Yet, by the second year we were getting exchange students from Columbia University in New York, University of Tokyo in Japan, and the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. This is truly remarkable as a sign of how international education is crucial and growing fast.



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Encouraging international scholars to work outside of their native countries is just as important as hosting international students in the ongoing dialogue about the importance of international education.

Singapore is a prime example of this. Singapore is a very small country. It is a tiny city-state. But it is also in some ways the most globalized country in the world. For example, Singapore is trying to develop research excellence in biotechnology. In biotechnology research, you need a Ph.D. or those in post-doc programs. About 80 to 90 percent of our researchers with Ph.D.s in biotechnology come from overseas. This has become very much a global trend. When you have a Ph.D., the world is open to you. You can go to any other country. Singapore probably, per capita, has more foreign scholars than any country in the world (although a large reason for this is because we are small nation).

Approximately 1,000 to 2,000 Ph.D.s are working and studying in Singapore. Our school also recruits Ph.D.s from overseas. We have 25 faculty members, of which only three or four are Singaporean, and the rest come from Uganda, United States, Canada, the

United Kingdom, Australia, India, China, Malaysia, and Vietnam. This is globalization at work.

**IE: What do you think is most important for students from all nations to learn to be successful in a global marketplace and to help solve world problems today?**

**MAHBUBANI:** There are two things that students from all nations have to learn to be successful today. First, they have to understand the interdependence of the world. They cannot just study their own countries. They have to study the rest of the world because the rest of the world has a direct impact on their lives. We can no longer afford to be insular. When you look at the curriculum and the textbooks, and you study what the teachers are programmed to teach, it's very important that a deep understanding and awareness is created of the rest of the world.

Secondly, it is very important today for students to have minds that are far more open than they used to be in previous generations. I have

found that one of the greatest competitive advantages I have is that I studied philosophy in the university both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. One of the most important lessons I learned from philosophy is that you should be able to ask questions about anything, even about ostensibly 'indisputable' truths.

For example, in the United States, most people believe that when the United States exports democracy, it is necessarily a good thing, and it always brings good results. But the record shows that in the last 10 years, the export of democracy can also lead to disaster. You have had disaster in the Balkans because you had two democratically- elected leaders fighting each other with great ferocity. You had democracy in Rwanda that led to genocide. You had democracy in Russia, which led to an implosion of living standards in Russia. Therefore, we need to have the courage, and the strength, and the capability to challenge longstanding beliefs in our societies. This is something new that we have to do in our world of today. **IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is managing editor of *IE*.




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