

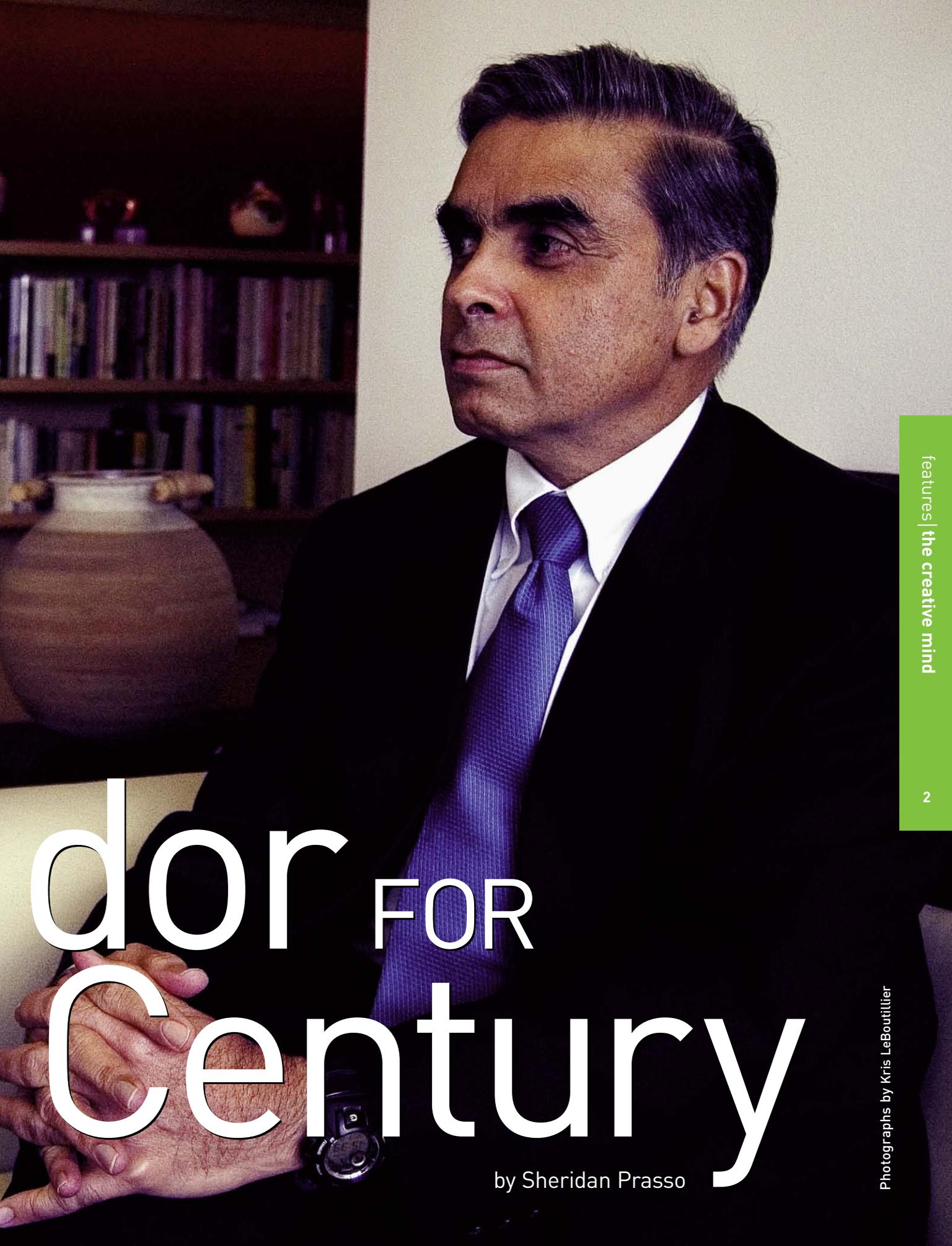
Ambassador for the Asian Century by Sheridan Prasso

from **strategy+business** issue 50, Spring 2008

reprint number 08108

Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani says the West should lose its arrogance and the East should step up to global leadership.

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by Sheridan Prasso

Photographs by Kris LeBoutillier

Sheridan Prasso

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Kishore Mahbubani understands the power of messages. Amid ringing phones and interruptions and with a bustling waiting room just outside his door, the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore is pondering a mock-up of an advertisement intended to attract new students. Below a row of upright yellow pencils are the words “Stand up to lead.” Mahbubani frowns. It’s not just the bad pun — *lead* as in pencils, *lead* as in leadership — that bothers him.

“What doesn’t come through is the one big message I want to put across,” Mahbubani says. “This ad is rather abstract. You can put any institution’s name on this, apply it to the London School of Economics and apply it to the Kennedy School of Government, but I want to make it something unique for our school.”

A staff member tries to argue for the pencils, but Mahbubani is resolutely formulating his idea. “I prefer to have something that focuses on Asia. The theme will be, ‘The Asian century is here.’ The tagline will say, ‘To enter the Asian century, come to the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy,’” he says, instructing the staff member to create an image of a door. “That is unique, something that LSE cannot sell, that the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Paris cannot sell, that Columbia University cannot sell. They’re not doors to Asia. That’s our unique competitive advantage, you see. That’s the message I want to convey.”

Kishore Mahbubani has spent years admonishing global leaders that we have entered an Asian century, when the economies of the East will surpass those of the West. That profound shift, he warns, requires equally profound attitude adjustments for leaders from both regions. How will China and India prepare to lead the

rest of the world? And how will the United States and Europe deal with losing their dominance? “The world is going to change faster and faster, and if I can play a role in minimizing misunderstandings, I want to do that,” he says. “I’m trying to explain both sides to each other.”

Mahbubani has assumed the role of interpreter throughout his career as a diplomat, author, counselor to policymakers and multinational corporations, and now educator. In those various capacities, Mahbubani has become one of Singapore’s most recognizable figures on the global stage. And he has used his prominence to drive his point home to leaders across the globe, in turn raising his profile by asking uncomfortable questions and providing occasionally undiplomatic analysis that is intended to jolt each side — East and West — out of its complacency about its place in the rest of the world. According to Mahbubani, only when Asia is ready to step up to its inevitable leadership, and Europe and the U.S. concede Asia’s emerging primacy, can we benefit from this new epoch. “Hundreds of millions of people,” he writes, “will be rescued from the clutches of poverty [and] the world as a whole will become more peaceful and stable.” With the publication of his latest book, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (Public Affairs, 2008), Mahbubani is solidifying his position as the mediator who will help each side negotiate its place in the new world order. And leaders from government and industry alike, from the East and the West, are paying attention.

Speaking Uncomfortable Truths

Mahbubani’s 1998 collection of essays, *Can Asians Think?* (Times Books International), served as his first notice of a pending geopolitical displacement that

would challenge both East and West. And although his message may have been galling to some, his gimlet-eyed view won him a legion of high-powered admirers. “If you are looking for insight into how others perceive us [Westerners] — and the events of September 11 underscore that need — then I know of no better guide than Kishore Mahbubani,” commented Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the United States’ Federal Reserve who is now a member of the Trilateral Commission and an advisor on international affairs, upon the publication of *Can Asians Think?* Says Joanne Myers, director of public affairs programs at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, “He’s provocative, thoughtful, clever, intelligent, and shrewd. He makes you aware there are people in the world who come to issues in a way we wouldn’t think about. He stirs things up.” N.R. Narayana Murthy, the founder of Infosys Technologies in Bangalore, insists that Mahbubani’s book “raised the confidence of many Asians.”

Mahbubani sealed his reputation as a straight-shooting interpreter between East and West with the 2005 publication of his second book, *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust between America and the World* (Public Affairs). As historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. noted with approval, “Kishore Mahbubani adores the United States and explains why the rest of the world does not.” *Beyond the Age of Innocence* gained him the paradoxical reputation of being a critic of the U.S. in Western eyes, and a defender of the U.S. to much of the rest of the world. “Many people think I’m anti-Western because I’m telling you the way you look at the world is wrong,” he says. “But at the same time, in Asia I’m perceived as Western.”

March to Modernity

The New Asian Hemisphere promises to be Mahbubani’s most provocative book to date. It sets out a blueprint for the Western response to Asia’s rise. “It was the West that triggered the Asian march to modernity,” he writes. “It should be cheering this positive new direction of world history.” In other words, the West should stop viewing Asians as outsourcing bogeymen, voracious consumers of the world’s dwindling resources, and abusers of human rights and the environment. Rather than lecturing the Asian nations on how to conduct themselves as novice members of the international community, the West needs to rethink its own conduct in the face of a fundamental power shift.

Mahbubani argues that the most prominent inter-

national institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the G8, and the United Nations — all currently dominated by Western countries — must keep step with Asia’s new dominance. The World Bank and IMF in particular need to reconsider the way they do business: Their own rules, which dictate that they be headed by Americans and Europeans, respectively, will lead to those institutions’ irrelevancy. Already, China is emerging as the largest economy in the world, and India will be the third largest, just behind the U.S., by 2050, according to the widely cited Goldman Sachs BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) study. “I’m an early-warning tremor, because after me the earthquake is coming,” Mahbubani says with a grin over a lime soda on a Sunday afternoon at his golf club. He calls the G8 “a joke,” and he has argued for India’s admission as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council.

Recognizing these power shifts and adapting international institutions accordingly will give those organizations greater global credibility and ultimately make the world more stable, he claims. A fusion of values, of “the best of the East and the best of the West,” will emerge, he says. He asserts that Asian cultures have more tolerance for diversity, as in the case of India’s generally harmonious society of Hindus, Muslims, and hundreds of ethnic groups. “The West will remain the single strongest civilization for many years to come, but the challenge is to convince them that although they’ve been part of the solution in the past, now they are part of the problem,” Mahbubani says. “The rise of Asia is not going to kill the West. Asia doesn’t want to dominate, it wants to replicate — it wants middle-class societies, peace, great universities, all the things you find in the West.”

But there’s one big difference: With the growth of China, nations with democratic governments will no longer be the largest actors in the global economy. “When Asian countries succeed, are they going to become cultural clones of the West?” Mahbubani asks. “No! The cultural domination of the world by one civilization is going to end. There’s a movement toward a ‘multi-civilizational’ world.”

Mahbubani is quick to point out that this will merely represent a reemergence. China and India had economies larger than any in Europe for many hundreds of years, until 1820, when the Industrial Revolution took hold in England. “Why did the resurgence not happen 100 years ago, why not 200 years ago, why

now?” he asked in May 2007 in his keynote speech at the CLSA Asia-Pacific Markets conference in Singapore. The answer is that Asian societies have only recently begun to adopt what Mahbubani calls the “seven pillars of Western wisdom”: free-market economics, the spread of science and technology, meritocracy, the culture of peace, the rule of law, the spread of education, and pragmatism. “The day Deng Xiaoping dropped central planning and introduced free-market economics, China became the fastest-growing economy in the world,” he said. “If you look at the Chinese Communist Party, for example, it is as meritocratic as Harvard University.” More than 80 percent of the people alive today who hold a science or technology Ph.D. are in Asia, he noted, and we can expect to see increasing levels of innovation from the region. “And yet, the most important thing for Western audiences to absorb with the rise of Asia is that Asians are not going out to dominate the West. They want to replicate the West and indeed bring many of its best practices to Asia.”

Unlike Western nations, where the rise of Germany in the last century provoked two world wars, Asia’s nations are developing new patterns of cooperation — all due to the insight of Beijing, he said. China saw in the September 11, 2001, attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq an opportunity to exert its influence in the rest of the world. “The fact that China bent over backward to be useful to America after the Iraq war...was a sign of [its] political acumen,” he said. In the 1960s and ’70s, China had a troubled relationship with Southeast Asia, mainly because it was supporting Communist insurgencies in Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. “It seemed China and Southeast Asia would always have difficult relations,”

Mahbubani continued. But even though the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has had a much longer relationship with the U.S. and Japan, the first country to sign a free trade agreement with ASEAN was China. Beijing’s self-interested calculation was to foster its neighbors’ prosperity so that they’d be less susceptible to any sort of containment strategy on the part of Japan or Western powers.

This may be news to many of the businesspeople in the audience, his speech continued, because the Western-dominated media hasn’t been reporting Beijing’s success stories. “They are too busy trying to understand the rise of Asia using the mental maps derived from the last century’s shifting of powers in Europe,” he said. The *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Economist*, he noted, continually report on China’s monumental environmental problems, its social instability, its lack of progress toward democracy, and its human rights abuses. “These are the articles written by minds programmed to expect the Western world is competent and the rest of the world is incompetent,” according to Mahbubani. “That’s not what’s happening.”

In the West, he continued, you will read that China’s drives into Africa and Latin America are largely a quest for natural resources, minerals, and energy. But China has understood that “in the new global order shaping up in the world, they have to seek out new active partners.” Take, for example, China’s ability to get most of the leaders of Africa to gather in Beijing for a summit in November 2006, which Mahbubani sees as a clear sign of long-term strategic thinking by China’s leadership. And in 2006, where did all 10 ASEAN leaders meet outside Southeast Asia for the first time?

Asian societies have only recently adopted what Mahbubani calls the “seven pillars of Western wisdom,” such as free-market economics, the rule of law, and the spread of education.

In Nanning, in southern China. “China is the most competent geopolitical actor in the world,” he said. “It’s remarkable that the newest power on the scene is emerging with unusual deftness and a good feel for what we need to do. It’s the established powers making all the mistakes.”

He then drew a contrast between China’s adroitness and “Western geopolitical incompetence.” He ticked off the “disasters” of Western policymaking: the bungling in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure of the Doha trade talks, and worsening global climate change. “What’s the biggest obstacle to finding a solution to global warming? Reluctance in the U.S. to make the sacrifices needed,” he said. “That’s incompetence.” As a fourth disaster he named the threat of nuclear proliferation. The U.S. has recognized Israel, India, and Pakistan as “semi-legitimate” nuclear powers. Now North Korea and Iran are following, seeking legitimacy as nuclear powers as well. “If the nonproliferation regime cracks,” he said, “it will be a more difficult world.”

It behooves the West, he said, to acknowledge Beijing’s clout and engage China’s leaders in developing a course of stability for the sake of the world. “Against the grand sweep of history,” Mahbubani concluded in his speech, “this rise of Asia is for real, and it will last.”

Leaders for the Asian Century

It’s not hard to see where Mahbubani’s world view comes from. He was born in India of Sindhi parents who fled the violent 1947 partition of India and Pakistan and settled in Singapore. Though he was raised in a city with a majority Chinese population and says that all his close friends are Chinese, Mahbubani’s favorite singer is Mohammad Rafi, the now deceased

Bollywood legend who is as important to Indian culture as Frank Sinatra and Elvis are to American culture. He keeps Rafi’s CDs in the stereo of his gold Lexus and listens to them during his commute to work. “Even though I’m Hindu, I learned to write Sindhi in Arabic script. As a child, I could read Arabic,” he says. “You cannot put people in cultural boxes.”

His father was a textile merchant who could not feed his family, so Mahbubani abandoned the Indian tradition of sons taking up the trade of their fathers; instead, he became the first in his family to get a university education. At the National University of Singapore, he rejected the scholarship he won in economics, choosing instead to study philosophy — a decision that meant he had to work nights as a tutor to stay on for a fifth year of education.

K. Kesavapany, director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, says Mahbubani’s decision to pursue academics was remarkable. The Sindhi community in Singapore typically focuses on mercantilism, not intellectualism. “Kishore was one of the earliest in Singapore to break away from the mold and establish himself as a scholar,” he says.

After he graduated with first-class honors in 1971, Mahbubani joined the foreign service and eventually became Singapore’s ambassador to the United Nations in the 1990s, getting married twice along the way (both times to American women).

He was far from being the faceless civil servant that diplomatic tradition would dictate. As president of the U.N. Security Council, a rotating position, in January 2001 and May 2002, Mahbubani challenged the domination of the five permanent members (the U.S., France, the U.K., Russia, and China). Although his

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efforts to bring in a management consulting team from outside were stymied, he was able to effect real, if modest, reforms that included streamlining the process by which the Security Council issues reports to the General Assembly. Mahbubani was a serious contender to replace Kofi Annan as U.N. secretary-general, but he was unable to secure the backing of the United States. Nevertheless, “he was one of the giants and one of the key players at the U.N., on the list of movers and shakers, a man with lots of ideas, always bringing a new debate into the discussion,” says Vanu Gopala Menon, who succeeded Mahbubani as Singapore’s ambassador to the U.N. “He makes points more dramatically than some people do. He comes out very sharp.” Adds Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the United Nations under-secretary-general for peacekeeping during Mahbubani’s tenure, “Once you are known to raise issues, people come to you, because they know you are going to be a player in the discussion, and then you become more of a player. That’s a great strength, to have the kind of mind he has. You can force the issues.”

Mahbubani’s current position at the National University of Singapore, which he has held since 2004, makes him, in many ways, an even more pivotal figure in the emergence of the Asian century. “I see him as one of the world’s leading public intellectuals,” says National University of Singapore President Shih Choon Fong. “He’s really building the future — the future of Singapore, and Singapore’s role in rising Asia. By coming to the university, he’s now engaging future leaders in the public sector and also the private sector. He’s drawn some of the best minds in Asia. In this way, the fruits will come much later, but be more enduring.”

The majority of students at the Lee Kuan Yew

School of Public Policy (named for Singapore’s founding prime minister, who held office from 1959 to 1990) are not from Singapore. Seventy-four percent of the 214 students enrolled in 2007’s fall semester are from other Asian countries, primarily China and India, and to a lesser extent Vietnam and Indonesia. Although it is, as Shih notes, too early to judge the results of Mahbubani’s academic undertaking, high-profile graduates of his young school include vice mayors of several large Chinese cities, and department or division directors in the Chinese State Development Planning Commission, the Vietnamese Ministry of Finance, the Lao Ministry of Commerce, the Reserve Bank of India, and the Philippine Department of Health. In addition, graduates include at least one Chinese CEO — Bao Ke of the Beijing Development Area Company Ltd. — and the chief economist of the Agrarian Reform Communities Project of the Asian Development Bank, Jay Bertram T. Lacsamana, who is Filipino.

The graduates of Mahbubani’s programs will be making decisions that affect billions of people in the region in the decades to come. They will be the emerging leaders in institutions of government that struggle to keep up with the pace of Asia’s growth.

Europe was the world’s center for education in the 400 to 500 years before World War II. In the 20th century, that role shifted to the United States. Now, with the rise of China and India, and the economic power that accompanies this ascendance, many expect Asia to emerge as the center of education sometime in the 21st century. Already, according to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 2006, 15 percent of the world’s top 200 universities are located in Asia. These include 11 in Chinese-speaking Asia (China, Hong Kong, and



Taiwan), 11 in Japan, three in Korea, and two in India (with the Indian Institutes of Technology ranked collectively as 57th). Three Asian universities rank in the top 20, including the National University of Singapore and the University of Tokyo, which are tied for 19th place.

Although the Lee Kuan Yew School has relationships with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, the Global Public Policy Network, the London School of Economics, and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, it is not a carbon copy of its Western partners. Rather, its three master's degree programs emphasize the public policy experiences of Asian countries and the critical challenges facing them, according to Mahbubani. "You've got to understand the cultures and political sys-

tems of the region." Students at the Lee Kuan Yew School encounter a world view that departs in some ways from pro-U.S. or pro-Western mentalities. "Apply an Asian lens and you will perhaps see things somewhat differently; you will get a different perspective," says Mahbubani's deputy, Vice Dean Stavros Yiannouka, a former strategy consultant. "It's the flavor of the courses that's different."

This difference is not quite as simple as rearticulating the "Asian values" idea, which in the 1990s extolled the influence of Confucianism, viewed as loyalty to family and society, a strong work ethic, and the forgoing of certain personal freedoms for the sake of societal stability. Among its adherents were Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and Mahbubani himself. But the concept of Asian values has largely been discredited in academic and policy circles because it does not represent the diverse cultures of Asia, nor is it unique to Confucius-influenced societies.

Rather, Mahbubani and his school embrace the "viable alternative path" theories of development, which hold that societies need not adopt every democratic ideal of the West to be fully functioning and successful. "His view is that he, and Asia, sees the world differently than the U.S. does," says Nobel laureate and Columbia University economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, who sits with Mahbubani on a World Economic Forum panel charged with developing a global public policy agenda. "In many respects he is right. For a part of the world where, for 150 years, Western values meant colonialism, imperialism, and talking about democracy but taking away democratic rights, as it did in the Opium War, 'Western values' may seem vacuous and hypocritical. This is a

population that could easily say, ‘We don’t know what Western values are, but if this is what is meant by Western values, we don’t like them.’”

Championing Asian Ideals

It’s worth noting that the Western ideal of democracy was not what drove the development of such potent economies as South Korea, Taiwan, and, yes, Singapore. Between 1959 and 2006, Singapore’s per capita GDP rose from US\$427 to \$29,474, making it one of the wealthiest countries in the region. It has a transparent and scandal-free government, a model system of revenue collection where citizens can pay their taxes online, one of the highest rates of broadband access in the world, a high level of public safety, dedication to the creation of green space, exemplary public services such as water and waste management, tough emissions standards that keep the city’s pollution levels low, and world-class health care that draws patients from all over Asia and the rest of the world.

That success is partly attributed, by Lee Kuan Yew himself, to the implementation of economic freedoms linked integrally with social controls. “If this is a ‘nanny state,’ I am proud to have fostered one,” Lee wrote in his memoir, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965–2000*. His People’s Action Party has dominated politics since 1959; his eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, was elected prime minister in 2004. Although opposition parties technically exist, the think tank Freedom House ranks Singapore as only “partly free.”

Notes K. Kesavapany of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: “Yes, democracy and human rights are important, but the right to have a roof over your head, to provide for your family, is equally important. If the

latter have to override the former, that’s the choice we make. Iraq has shown how flawed the Western argument is. Iraqis say, ‘Yes, we have democracy, but we are not safe, we don’t have a means to put a roof over our heads.’ Lee Kuan Yew had state control to ensure that the [government] can be left to safely do work in peace, and media was to be used for the development of the country and not for people with agendas to interfere in internal affairs.”

Mahbubani does not disagree, and it’s clear that he has had to play by Singapore’s rules in order to reach the position he is in today. He publicly supports such Singaporean tenets as the former ban on chewing gum and other so-called nanny state laws. In fact, he is “110 percent the apologist for the Singapore government,” according to a professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School who asked for anonymity. Of course, espousing those policies would have been expected of any representative of Singapore, and Mahbubani served in the country’s foreign service for 33 years. “He thinks outside the box except when it comes to Singapore government policy,” says Tommy Koh, a fellow Singaporean diplomat who preceded Mahbubani at the U.N. and also published widely during the “Asian values” debate. When pressed, Mahbubani will concede that the Singaporean government is not perfect, but insists that he will not criticize it either, since he owes “everything I have” to the opportunities it provided him.

Mahbubani asserts that Singapore has done an excellent job of addressing the needs of the majority of its people — and that American ideals such as a free press do not work in small countries like Singapore, nor in countries, such as China or Vietnam, where economic development has not reached a certain level

of stability. Ironically, Mahbubani wanted to be a journalist when he graduated from college and twice applied to work at the Singapore *Straits Times* newspaper; however, the terms of his scholarship dictated that he join government service.

Rather than theoretical ideals, Mahbubani says, what's most important is what a government delivers to its people. "It's not about the kind of government you have; it's more about the quality of government you have. You can have good governance with democratic rule as you do in India, or under Communist Party rule as you have in China. You can have bad governance under democratic rule as you have in the Philippines, or bad governance under Communist rule as in North Korea," he says. "The West said, 'Russia, you're taking the right road in becoming more democratic; China, you're taking the wrong road in keeping your Communist Party.' In 1990, that was a Western judgment. Seventeen years later, it's very clear that Russia took the wrong road and China took the right road. It's so hard to get any Westerner to admit that now. The lesson we learned is that good governance is far more important than the form of political system."

But he won't go so far as to say that he's advocating that other governments — those that send their students to his school — replicate the "Singapore model." Although he lauds Singapore's achievements, Mahbubani recognizes the key flaw of the Singapore model: that it never fostered home-grown entrepreneurialism and a flourishing private sector. Lee Kuan Yew's model of development was to invite in foreign multinational companies to create jobs, stimulate growth, and use Singapore as a hub for the region, rather than encourage indigenous growth fostered by Singaporean companies. The result is that today, big business is largely controlled either by multinationals or by state-owned corporations — a dramatic difference from the business environments of other thriving economies such as China and India. Singapore's \$100 billion investment vehicle, Temasek Holdings, has as its executive director Ho Ching, the wife of the current prime minister and therefore Lee Kuan Yew's daughter-in-law. Entrepreneurialism in Singapore is confined to relatively few small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Mahbubani notes that as the image of the U.S. suffers blow after blow on the international stage, Singapore's example is playing well in a region that is in need of strategies for managing rapid growth, and that increasingly refuses to be judged on its human rights

record by the country responsible for the abuses at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. "I never thought that in my lifetime, Singapore's human rights record would be better than America's," Mahbubani scoffs. "America has lost its moral authority on human rights issues. As someone who's been on the receiving end of human rights lectures for the last 30 years, I can tell you, the rest of the world laughs at the U.S." That sentiment makes the Lee Kuan Yew School a palatable option for governments sending their officials abroad for education. Also fueling that sentiment is the fact that officials from developing countries get their education at the Lee Kuan Yew School almost free, through scholarships.

In keeping with his view that the West's democratic ideals do have an important place in a region where economies have matured, Mahbubani supports the eventual adoption of those concepts, including universal human rights, for all Asian countries at some point in the future. But economic progress, he insists, has to pave the way toward those ideas. "I have seen great shifts in history," he says, noting that in his lifetime, he has witnessed the end of both colonial rule and the threat of communism. Now, he says, "I can see the rise of Asia as one huge tide coming." His chosen contribution is to help both the East and the West navigate that tide toward a future that benefits both. +

Reprint No. 08108

Resources

Sven Behrendt, "The Statecraft of Business," *s+b*, Autumn 2007, www.strategy-business.com/press/article/07314: Demonstrates that corporate strategy can be based on international relations theory.

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Kishore Mahbubani, *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust between America and the World* (Public Affairs, 2005): Argues that U.S. imprudence toward two huge populations — the Chinese and Muslims — led to the United States' diminished global authority.

Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians Think?* (Times Books International, 1998): A wake-up call to Asians and Westerners alike.

Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (Public Affairs, 2008): How a new type of partnership can help the West and East avoid conflict.

Edward Tse, "China's Five Surprises," *s+b*, Winter 2005, www.strategy-business.com/press/article/05401: Explains why in the world's fastest-growing economy, the last 10 years are not the best guide to the next 10 years.

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