



Thought Leader: Kishore Mahbubani

Thought Leaders Forum

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Transcript

As part of the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council's Devin Stewart spoke with diplomat and author Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and professor in the Practice of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

DEVIN STEWART: We usually start off by asking about how you see the world today. Is it unique compared to times in the past? Especially from a moral perspective, what's unique today?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: In my view, we are living in the best of times ever in human history. In fact, not since human history began have so many people seen such a dramatic improvement in their standard of living as we are seeing today. If you want to put it in moral terms, if reduction of poverty is a moral goal, then we have actually reduced more poverty in the last 30 years than we have in the last 2,000 years.

As you know, the UN set out its [Millennium Development Goals](#) to halve global poverty by 2015. The UN is not going to meet most of its Millennium Development Goals, but it will succeed in meeting the Millennium Development Goal of halving global poverty because of the enormous successes of China and India, for example.

So I think from the point of view of someone who lives outside America, especially in Asia, these are the best of times that Asians have experienced in a very, very long time.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you foresee things keep getting better or do you worry about things over the horizon?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I'm actually frighteningly optimistic about the future. I actually think things are going to get much, much better.

You see, you must understand from my point of view, when I grew up in Singapore—I was born in Singapore in 1948 and Singapore became independent in 1965—Singapore was a poor developing country with the same per capita income as Ghana. I grew up in a poor family in a poor country. Now I belong to a comfortable middle class in a very happily prosperous country like Singapore. So I have seen dramatic change in my lifetime.

The one concrete example I always give is that we never had a flush toilet until I was 12 years old. I always say my life is life before the flush toilet and life after the flush toilet. Now billions of people are going to get flush toilets. That's an example of the change that's coming.

DEVIN STEWART: Despite being a frighteningly optimistic person, is there anything that you might point to that we should pay attention to, that deserves moral concern?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I think we should be concerned about the possibility that the West, which has traditionally led the world for the past 200 years, may become very frightened of the new world

that is emerging and, instead of reaching out to the rest of the world, maybe withdrawing into itself. That will be a tragedy for that to happen.

In many ways, as I explained in my previous book, *The New Asian Hemisphere*, the reason why the Asian states are succeeding now is because they have finally understood, absorbed, and are implementing seven pillars of Western wisdom. So it's ironic that when the rest of the world is embracing Western wisdom, the West is becoming afraid of some of its own pillars of Western wisdom.

We should be seeing a narrowing of the gap between the East and the West. Instead, we are seeing a growing gap between East and West. That's something that needs to be addressed.

DEVIN STEWART: The seven pillars—[Bilahari \[Kausikan\]](#) actually talked about this a few weeks ago—is this what you mean by great convergence? Do you want to talk about the great convergence?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: Yes. I think the biggest phenomenon of our time is what I call the great convergence, the subject of my next book, which is called *The Great Convergence*, which is that in the past a very small percentage of the world's population enjoyed the kind of comfortable living standards that the West in Europe and America enjoyed. Now that number is going to grow exponentially.

To give you an example, right now there are 500 million people in the year 2012 who enjoy middle class living standards in Asia. By 2020, that number is going to jump from 500 million to 1.75 billion. That's a remarkable increase. And it is going to change the global chemistry. By 2030, probably more than half the world's population is going to enjoy middle class living standards. That, in moral and ethical terms, is a remarkably positive development, because the capacity of people to escape the imprisonment of poverty is going to grow dramatically in the next few decades.

DEVIN STEWART: Part of our project is to analyze, illuminate an idea that we're exploring, called a global ethic. Everyone seems to have a different idea about what that means. In fact, some of the students at the National University of Singapore have some thoughts on it.

Does that concept, a global ethic, mean anything to you; and, if so, what does it mean?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I do discuss this concept of the global ethic in my next book, *The Great Convergence*, in which I point out that the nation-state was invented over 350 years ago under the [Treaty of Westphalia](#), and it's hard to believe that, even though the world has changed so dramatically, we still continue to use a political construct that is over 350 years old.

I think the nation-state is in many ways becoming an antique, because the conditions of humanity have changed. Before, when you had 7 billion people living in 193 separate countries, it was like living on 193 separate boats, so you only had the rules to make sure that the boats didn't collide with each other.

But now the 7 billion people don't live in 193 separate boats; they live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat. So if you live on the same boat, you clearly want to create a code of conduct among everyone to ensure that you don't sink the boat, because if you sink the boat everybody is going to be affected.

So in a sense, now you cannot have a situation where countries say, "I'm doing it only for my

national interest.” Excuse me. You may be doing it for your national interest, you may be taking care of your cabin, but you are going to damage the boat. So you’ve got to balance national interest against global interest. I think that’s the direction in which global ethics is going to go.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you want to talk about what the content of the code of conduct would be?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: The good thing about ethical principles is that they are a few thousand years old and they are very similar in most cultures. To use the oldest one, “Do unto others as thou wouldst have others do unto you,” to apply that to my metaphor of the boat, you should take care of you cabin in the same way that you would like your neighbor to take care of his cabin. You don’t want your neighbor to wash his cabin and spill all the dirty water out into the corridor and into your cabin, right? You want your neighbor to be responsible and be aware of the impact of his actions on your cabin.

That’s what the new global ethic is going to be all about, because when you live in a small, dense, interconnected world, whether you like it or not, whatever you do has an impact on other countries. So when America has [QE1](#), [QE2](#), [QE3](#) [quantitative easing, rounds 1, 2, and 3] and you pump a lot of money into the global system, there will be global inflation; everybody is going to be hurt. So you’ve got to think very hard: “Is that the right thing to do for everyone else in the world?” and not just say, “Hey, I’ve just got to do this for my national interest.”

Every country has got to think in the same way. For example, America is very worried about greenhouse gas emissions from China, and certainly the Chinese are going to buy cars in hundreds of thousands. Now, if you want the Chinese to be more responsible about acquiring cars, then America should say, “Okay, I am the richest country, I will take the lead and I will increase the price of gasoline by one dollar a gallon to reduce gasoline consumption, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and be a model for China.”

That’s what you need in the world. You cannot preach to China and ask them to cut down their greenhouse gas emissions if you yourself are not prepared to take the lead in doing so.

DEVIN STEWART: One of our questions is looking at the greatest ethical challenge on the planet. This feedback mechanism or interdependence, is that your greatest concern, or is there something else?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I would say there are many ethical challenges that we face. But clearly, the number one ethical priority we should make today is to get everyone to be aware that we live in a small global community. When you live in a small global community, we should be aware of the impact of our actions on the rest of the people living in the same global community.

That requires a tremendous change in mindset. Even if you read, let’s say, a *New York Times* editorial that says America should be doing this because it’s good for America, I would like the same editor to say, “Yes, it is good for America, but is it also good for the rest of the world?” Do you know what I mean?

That balancing of American national interest and global interest doesn’t come reflexively, naturally, to the thought leaders in America. That’s something they should begin to do as we move towards living in the small global community.

DEVIN STEWART: I think that’s a fantastic goal and really speaks to our mission. It sort of begs the question: How? We would think that the how is through education. But what would you say?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I think the answer to your question "how" is why I wrote this book, *The Great Convergence*, with a mission to try and change the mindsets of people, especially leading policymakers, about how to manage the world. I think if you continue to focus on your national interest, and if all 193 nations do that, it becomes a zero-sum game. You've got to move away from a zero-sum game to a positive-sum game.

Even if you work it out rationally in pragmatic terms, it is actually in everyone's interest to cooperate together in the small global community that we are creating, because the benefits of cooperation far outweigh the alternative of noncooperation. So that's why. You can demonstrate that through example after example.

The reason why global prosperity has grown in the last 50, 60 years is because global trade has grown. If you apply the laws of comparative advantage, if everyone opens up their economies, we are all better off.

DEVIN STEWART: We're turning 100 years old in 2014. We were founded right before [World War I](#), as you probably know, by [Andrew Carnegie](#). Part of our centennial project is to look to the next 100 years, because we don't want to dwell too much on the past. The past is important, obviously, but we'd like to think about what people would like to see over the next 100 years. What would you like to see happen?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: As you know, in the years 1914 to 2014 we saw some of the biggest wars that human history has ever seen. It is conceivable that in the years 2014 to 2114 we may see equally major wars. But I actually think they can be avoided because, fortunately, if you watch the trends of the last 30 years, wars are becoming a sunset industry. We can actually reduce wars dramatically in the next 100 years, but we have to learn to behave responsibly.

To give you a concrete example, it is absolutely absurd that America and Russia have this huge stockpile of nuclear weapons that are completely unnecessary. If they are used, they will destroy themselves and destroy the whole world.

So when you have responsible elder statesmen, like [Kissinger](#), [Shultz](#), [Nunn](#), [Perry](#), saying, "Hey, let's get rid of most of the nuclear weapons," why isn't America doing so?

I think if you want to ensure that the next 100 years are much better than the previous 100 years, we must take some really bold steps. One of the boldest steps we can do is to go eventually towards a zero-nuclear-weapon world. But long before we get there, come on, let's cut the numbers down from thousands to the hundreds, from the hundreds to the tens, and that's all you need for deterrence today.

DEVIN STEWART: That leads into our next question, which is: Do you think world peace is possible? Andrew Carnegie was a huge advocate for world peace. That's in fact why he founded Carnegie Council to promote this idea, to carry on that legacy. Is it possible?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I know that among hardheaded strategic thinkers it is unfashionable to talk about world peace. People who talk about world peace are perceived to be softheaded. But actually I believe that the strategic analysts who don't talk about world peace are the ones who have got something wrong with their heads.

I actually think that world peace is not just possible, it's highly likely in the years to come, because there is absolutely no reason today to go to war with one another because you can succeed and

become a thriving, prosperous country—in fact, you are more likely to succeed in becoming a thriving, prosperous country—if you avoid wars. Whereas in the past, for the first 2,000 years since [Christ](#) was born, the assumption was that you achieve national greatness by creating a large army and invading other countries. Now we know with modern weaponry that's actually a stupid thing to do.

So just as wars between major states today have almost gone down to zero, as you know, I think wars in general can go down to zero. So this is the time to achieve world peace, and it can be done, and my book *The Great Convergence* explains how.

DEVIN STEWART: I can't wait to read that. I think I'll probably agree with everything in it.

The final question is: These challenges you've talked about today, although it's very bright and optimistic and I feel perked up on a rainy day—but who is ultimately accountable for the problems? Are the more powerful states more responsible, or does it fall in the hands of powerful individuals? Who is responsible?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: I think that the nature of human history doesn't change overnight, and great powers will behave like great powers. Clearly, whether you like it or not, you have to give a greater stake to great powers in the management of global affairs.

So, for example, I have a formula for re-forming the UN Security Council, where I say the five permanent members of the UN Security Council should no longer be the victors of [World War II](#), because World War II ended in 1945 and we are now in 2013. So the great powers of tomorrow should be given the permanent membership of the UN Security Council. But I insist that together with the privilege of being a permanent member, you must have responsibilities that go with the privilege of being a permanent member. So if you can equate privileges of great power status in the UN Security Council with responsibilities, then I think you will create a better world order.

DEVIN STEWART: Perfect. Thank you, Kishore.

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: My pleasure.

Point B Podcast

"You've got to balance national interest against global interest. I think that's the direction in which global ethics is going to go."

Video Clip

"By 2030, probably more than half the world's population is going to enjoy middle class living standards. That, in moral and ethical terms, is a remarkably positive development, because the capacity of people to escape the imprisonment of poverty is going to grow dramatically in the next few decades."

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