

THE GREAT CONVERGENCE: ASIA, THE WEST, AND THE LOGIC OF ONE WORLD

AUTHOR: KISHORE MAHBUBANI

Reviewed by Lauren Madow

Kishore Mahbubani is a Professor of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and served as a Singapore diplomat for several decades, beginning in the 1970s. *The Great Convergence* is a book about global concepts—the ‘global village’, global governance, a global economy—but Mahbubani uses his own life story to frame his central argument: an increasingly multipolar international system is the new reality, and Western powers clinging to an outdated system in which the “West is best” will suffer grim consequences down the road.

One of the book’s central arguments depicts a “population divergence and income convergence,” which has caused more and more of the world’s population to converge in the middle class. Mahbubani experienced this trend personally growing up in 1950s Singapore: “Singapore was then a British colony. No one believed that Singapore could become as prosperous as London. Yet the unthinkable happened. Now this ‘impossible’ feat is being replicated in all corners of the world.” Mahbubani argues that this convergence has reduced suffering by lifting millions out of poverty, decreasing violence, opening access to education, and establishing a set of globally shared values.

Though he is convinced that the West will eventually embrace “one world logic,” Mahbubani is well aware of entrenched state resistance to global governance, having witnessed it firsthand during his stint representing Singapore at the UN. “To put it bluntly,” he states, “humanity lacks both the imagination and the courage to deliver bold new solutions” that would allow for a collective reconception of global order. Until we get there, Mahbubani suggests, we should direct our energy toward strengthening the UN, ASEAN and other cooperative transnational institutions.

The Great Convergence is a survey of Mahbubani’s takes on major global issues, neatly divided into lists and sub-lists (chapters include “Seven Global Contradictions” and “A Theory of One World,” composed of Four Pillars). His style is simple and jargon-free, in accordance with his

absolute belief in openness and transparency. Mahbubani’s frustration with leaders who do not share this belief in openness is evident throughout the book and his chief complaint, unsurprisingly, is with the US.—though China scores several mentions in this arena as well. He points to the US’ reliance on sanctions in Iran as an example of wrong-headed, isolating policy which only breeds resentment. A superior, though slower, strategy would be to open to and engage with Iran, particularly through inviting Iranian students to study in the West. Likewise, Mahbubani credits Myanmar’s increasingly open society partly to ASEAN’s continued engagement with the state, offering its leaders exposure to relatively democratic practices through attending ASEAN conferences.

Mahbubani is a fair critic, unwilling to idealize or demonize any institution or actor. He provides an exhaustive supply of data to support his ideas and offers concrete suggestions for improving faulty global governance mechanisms. *The Great Convergence* amounts to a powerful argument that although acknowledging shifts in global power dynamics may be anathema to the West, continued denial of a converging world could eventually lead to its downfall. 

Lauren Madow is a journalist and documentary filmmaker. She is a regular contributor to Global Post, a researcher at the Knight Program for Media and Religion, and an Executive Producer at Neon Tommy. She is currently pursuing her Master's in Public Diplomacy at USC.